The children of Musoma

Keval Ashok Shah goes on a life-changing journey to help make a difference in Musoma, Tanzania

After months of anticipation, Tanzania came into view. What better way to define this than with the snow peak of Kilimanjaro, glistening in the moonlight. It was enough to make us wake up after the exhausting 14-hour journey from London Heathrow, as we drove along a pitch-black road to an inn in Moshi, where we were going to spend the first night. Nothing prepares you for its beauty, and one can only gawk in wonder at its immense size. The team staring out of the windows were Dr Manny Vasant, Mrs Meena Vasant, Dr Kishor Vasant, Dr Auriel Gibson, Hudson Cook (a builder by trade), Fleur (a dental practice manager) and myself.

On the road

The next day, we visited the town of Moshi, which is situated 70km east of Arusha. What struck me immediately, was the pace... how laidback everything was, compared to London. No one seemed to be in a hurry, and I put it down to the blazing midday sun. After buying much-needed bananas, chocolates and water, we visited Marangu Falls, in the foothills of Kilimanjaro. We stood for a while and took in the sight of the 60-foot cascade dropping into a plunge pool, which led away as a rivulet through a dense jungle that seemed to stretch for miles.

The next we made our way back to the airport to fly to Mwanza, the southern port of Lake Victoria. Looking out of the plane, it was easy to see the devastating impact of human activity on the environment. Hundreds of hectares of forests had been cleared to make way for grazing and farming, evident by myriads of white lanes in the barren land. But that was what it was – barren. I don't know if it was due to lack of rainfall, or overuse... it just seemed like a huge waste, land that could no longer be used by people or animals.

Upon landing, we visited the Hindu Union Hospital, where I witnessed a small portion of the enormous contribution Manny had made to the healthcare in Tanzania. The dental clinic he donated was well up and running, except for a handpiece, that he quickly made a note to fix.

A few more bottles of water, and we began on the three-hour journey to Musoma, with the Serengeti rushing past us on the right as we touched its heart of the Serengeti, and gave birth to lightning. I could just imagine the horror in the eyes of a wildebeest, as the bolt illuminated a crouching likeness with only one thing on its mind.

Arriving at Musoma

Dreams aside, we reached Musoma, to be warmly welcomed by Denis Mahina, Andy Vanzandt, Lizzie Cameron and her parents. Denis, a small man with a big heart, started the Lake Victoria Disability Centre (LVDC), with nothing more than his savings and determination, to improve access to social, economic and educational opportunities for disabled youths in the Mara region of Tanzania. Many articles are constructed by the trainees and assistants (for example, desks, bicycles for the disabled) and sold to help fund the project. The project is otherwise funded by donation and has charitable status. The absence of regular funding is a continual problem.

Andy Vanzandt, a 22-year-old qualified carpenter/joiner from Suffolk, is spending three months in Musoma to teach his skills at the LVDC, and help with its renovation.

Lizzie, a 26-year-old graphic designer from Edinburgh, Scotland, found out about the project, and joined him, to work with the local disabled children and teenagers. She has been living in Musoma for a year now, except for one month this summer, when she returned home to get a job to fund her work and living expenses in Tanzania.

A vibrant and beautiful town, Musoma is situated on the shores of Lake Victoria. Manny and Kishor grew up here, which explains their deep love for the place and its people. Sadly, ever since the 1970s, the town has suffered economic decline. The isolated rural majority across Mara continue to suffer from abject poverty due to an absence of employment opportunities, ill health caused by malnutrition, and shortage of schools and affordable health centres.

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Back to school

We planned to work in Musoma for four days, and Lizzie organised our schedule to see and treat the children from the Mwisenge Blind School, the Mwenbeni Deaf and Intellectually-impaired School, and the youth from the LVDC. One in ten people in Tanzania are disabled – 5.5 million people suffer from a physical, mental, hearing or visual impairment. This statistic is high because of causes such as catching malaria or meningitis as a baby, unprofessional administration of herbal medicine, mis-
Treating children from the Mwisenge Blind School

handling during delivery, trauma etc.

Education in Tanzania is free, but clothing, books and equipment need to be purchased. In rural areas, classes are large, holding more than 60 students each. Approximately 80 per cent of children attend to the age of 11 but only 50 per cent go on to secondary education. Books, writing materials, teachers and their assistants, are all in short supply. Swahili is the taught language of primary school and English at secondary level.

The classrooms did not have adequate light, so I decided to do the check-ups outside. Within seconds of suggesting this, benches and chairs were brought out and transformed into a makeshift dental chair and the largest waiting room I had ever seen.

While the first day's challenge was verbally communicating reassurance to the kids who could not see, the next day's hurdle was to successfully gesture to those who could not hear. The teachers at the Greenfingers Deaf School taught us basic sign language, but I realised that if you looked into the child's eyes with an honest willingness to help him/her, that child put all their trust in you. A gentle reassuring hand on the shoulder was enough to put them at ease. The most challenging were the mentally impaired kids, but the headmaster's kind words and reassurance enabled their compliance. Children that thought they had a systemic illness or condition, were referred onto Dr Kishor Vasudeva and facilitated further treatment.

The view over the Serengeti

Despite contributions from a few organisations, the majority of these funds have originated from his own hard-earned wealth. He has facilitated the provision of dental equipment, including units and dental chairs, and medical necessities like oxygen cylinders, defibrillators and beds.

We spent the remaining days in Tanzania, admiring nature in the Serengeti and Ngorongoro. Words cannot describe the feeling of being among some of the most beautiful animals on Earth, as the wildebeest migrated in their hundreds, elephants drinking in the river and watching their little ones wandering around in excitement, monkeys hiding their babies as we approach, lionesse stalking their prey among the savannah, zebras grazing in pairs, giraffes walking in majestic strides, giant hippos enjoying the sun, and a lazy leopard fast asleep on an acacia tree. It is simply enchanting.

At the end of it, even I couldn't keep a straight face!

Prevention better than the cure

The unseen killers in this part of Africa are malaria and HIV. The population of mosquitoes grows, the nearer you get to the lake. A number of Dennis's family members, including himself and little Rodney, have tasted the wrath of this disease, and he is now in the process of raising capital to build a house away from the shores. But it has been challenging for him, as most of the time, he is working voluntarily.

Prevention is key to the reduction of the prevalence of these diseases. Education and awareness are the weapons of choice. Just at the entrance of one of the schools, we discovered a massive collection of stagnant water - a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Measures such as the provision of insecticide nets, and the provision of mosquito nets, would go a long way indeed. Over the years, Manny has spent a significant time and energy in raising awareness and funds to improve healthcare in Musoma. Despite contributions from a few organisations, the majority of these funds have originated from his own hard-earned wealth. He has facilitated the provision of medical equipment, including units and dental chairs, and medical necessities like oxygen cylinders, defibrillators and beds.

The way forward

Denis is planning to arrange an outreach programme to target people in the rural parts of Africa, to get people aware of AIDS and HIV. And if the right abilities and how to prevent them. To raise funds, he is thinking of opening a pizza takeaway service...the first in Musoma. He continues to support his family and to bring a home to other children who need one. He is the driving force behind the LDVC, and an inspiration to all who know him.

Lizzie has become an angel for the kids of Musoma, a constant provider of joy for them. She continues her work with the local disabled children and teenagers, teaching and caring for them, and always thinking of ways to improve their lives. Sandra aids in her daughter's work, and manages health care for the children. Gilbert, Lizzie's dad, a teacher by profession, is in the process of helping in the renovation of Dennis's new home.

Manny and Auriel have put their efforts into creating a medical and dental training centre, adjacent to LDVC. This would aim to train local persons to become adept at recognising disease, and act alongside a trained and experienced dentist. The knowledge and expertise of dentists from the UK would be greatly welcomed. In addition to final year dental students from the UK to visit and carry out the surgery, and other research activities within an 'elective' framework. In addition to this, Manny is trying to raise money to improve LDVC itself. Donations will allow the construction of dormitories for disabled students from other areas, employment of more staff to teach the necessary communication skills, construction of classrooms, and development of a health outreach programme for the Lake Victoria region. 

Upon returning to the UK, Andy Vanzandt plans to continue being involved in projects aimed at reducing world poverty.

A better place

This has been a true example of the power of the individual to make the world a better place; an illustration of a deeper approach to the reduction of poverty through improvement of health care; a case of not following the sheep, doing your own thinking, and taking a different path…a shift from the ‘me me me’ psychology to caring more about others who need help.

This trip has strengthened my purpose in life – reduce poverty and conserve what is left of nature. The two cannot be separated; if one worsens, so does the other, and vice versa. It has never been enough to just sit back and wait for governments and organisations to make a move. Mahatma Gandhi said; ‘We must become the change we want to see in the world.’

Overpopulation is a basic issue that needs to come first on the agenda of every charity in existence. It cannot be ignored. All our efforts are cancelled out if we cannot control the growth of the human population. No one likes a crowded train or having to fight for jobs…at the rate at which we are going, we will soon have to fight for food and water, a phenomenon already facing the millions living in poverty.

It will take all of us to make a real and significant change in this world. And how we live here, affects everything and everyone around us. The fundamental problem is the ‘me, me, me’ psychology and the ‘I want more’ lifestyle.

Survival of the fittest can be allowed in the Serengeti…not in London, New York and Dubai! We have evolved beyond searching for food and shelter in the wilderness, to become intelligent beings that are capable of caring for more than ourselves. As poorer countries develop to give their people basic healthcare, education and nutrition, more resources will be consumed and the environment will have to pay dearly for this. We must change our lifestyle to accommodate this.

It is time to give more, take less and evolve further. It is time to become the change.

About the author

Keval Ashok Shah is a community dentist, working in Northampton. He gives special thanks to Iain Scott, and his books In Africa and Africa, which speak louder than words. He believes that time is of the essence and that we must all get involved in this onerous cause. You can email him on kevalashok@gmail.com or text/call him on 07826 972189.