What a welcome when we arrived at Musoma for the 10th anniversary of the Lake Victoria Disability Centre (LVDC)!

More than 200 people had gathered on the four-acre site to participate in the unveiling of the foundation stone of a brand new dental centre and the accompanying tree planting ceremony. We were also treated to the most wonderfully impressive African singing, dancing and hospitality.

The AOG has made a major contribution to the funding of the dental unit in Musoma, and Manny Vasant and Pommi Datta from the 11-member AOG delegation were both privileged to speak on this important occasion.

Acknowledgement

The Mayor of Musoma and the Regional Development Officer also spoke, praising the work and acknowledging the care now being offered to the handicapped in a country that still widely despises disability.

It is thought that approximately 10 per cent of the population of Tanzania suffer from some form of disability, with polio or measles still frequently the cause of paralysis or deafness. An unknown but significant proportion of the population is albinos, and children are sometimes mutilated shortly after birth by witch doctors. These children often have to be institutionalised for their own safety.

Dennis’ vision

The origins of the LVDC can be traced to the activities of a gentle Tanzanian man named Dennis, who had a vision for helping those less fortunate than himself, and quietly started a charity on the lakeside at Musoma 10 years ago.

Dennis began by teaching engineering skills to partially paralysed young men from a workshop in Musoma town centre. Homemade, hand-pedalled bicycles revolutionised the lives of polio paraplegics, and gradually the workshops expanded to include a screen printing business, a sewing machine class and a thriving shop in the heart of the commercial district. There is also now a deaf and dumb unit.

In 2008 a small group of UK dentists from the AOG visited Musoma and carried out some basic dentistry within the local hospital. Part of the purpose of their trip was to assess the practicability of improving the dental facility within the hospital, and also to assess the need for dental and oral disease treatment. It became apparent that enhancing the dental unit within the hospital would not be appropriate, since it could not be adequately maintained and a high rate of staff turnover indicated a likely dilution of management responsibility.

Feasible

However, by working closely with the Lake Victoria Disability Centre, a viable, easily maintained dental unit became a much more feasible proposition. It was therefore exciting to see the foundation stone being unveiled on the outside of the AOG building which will eventually house a dental surgery. With many local people currently opting for a 125-mile journey to Mwanza for a simple extraction rather than choosing local treatment, the new dental centre will certainly not lack patients!

While the current demand for dental treatment is relatively low, the town of Musoma is changing rapidly. The population is increasingly mobile, with many more cars, bicycles and scooters in evidence than on previous visits, power sup-
The origins of the LVDC can be traced back to the 1970s, when the children of this generation of parents were often confined to living in the hospital due to congenital conditions or disabilities. The current demand for dental services in the area is increasing, with many more cars, bicycles, and scooters in evidence than previous visits. Power supply is increasingly mobile, and there is also an increasing number of people with hearing impairments, meaning that dental treatment is required extraction! As well as caring for the physical health of people, the dental centre also provides therapies to raise levels of understanding as well as the overall standard of oral health.

Aside from dentistry, another major part of the AOG mission in Musoma is education. This involves teaching anything from English and Maths to vocational and technical skills such as bookkeeping, plumbing, carpentry and so on. Skills such as these are all vitally important to the local people, and can help the unemployed find work. There is also an important occupational therapy element to our work, as education is a great way of giving people purpose, and for the disabled users of the LVDC, these skills can prove particularly invaluable.

With the new centre now well underway, we look forward to returning again soon. We already have another trip to Africa planned for July, so if you haven’t signed up already, visit our website for more information!

The AOG – towards the greater good.

Contact info
For further details on forthcoming trips and events, or to join, visit www.aoguk.org

Future services
A number of factors need to be considered in planning the area’s future dental services, with perhaps the most important being local acceptance. A possible link to the dental school in Dar-es-Salaam, which currently sends newly qualified graduates ‘on service’ to areas such as Musoma, may be the way forward. Unfortunately, at present in Musoma ‘on service’ dentistry is confined to treating teeth that have failed completely and require extraction! As well as dentists, there is an evident and urgent need for dental health educators and therapists to raise levels of understanding as well as the overall standards of oral health.