

The Musoma Story

Reports from Tanzania

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 eleven member AOG delegation were both privileged to speak on this important occasion.

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% 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 albino, and children are sometimes mutilated shortly after birth by witch doctors. These children often have to be institutionalised for their own safety.

The origins of the LDVC 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. Home made, 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.

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 supplies are less erratic and Fanta and Coke seem to be universal! As the standard of living improves, there will obviously be a greater need for higher quality dental services. To emphasise the need, the population statistics are frightening. According to a worker with the C of E diocese there is a population explosion, with the current demographic showing 25% are under the age of 5 and 40% under the age of 15 years! (This is partly due to the previous generation being decimated by AIDS and the children of this generation enjoying much higher survival rates.)

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-Salam, 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.

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 LVDS, 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.

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