

Keith's on a mission with Operation Smile

Newport and Cwmbran dentist Keith Morgan will soon embark on his third mission with charity Operation Smile. It will be his second time aboard the USNS Mercy (United States Navy Ships), this time to Cambodia. His previous missions to Papua New Guinea and Kenya during 2008 and 2009 have recently been broadcast in a series of documentaries on BBC Radio Wales.

"I can't help but tell my patients about the trips – they truly are life-changing experiences," says Keith, principal at Malpas Dental Practice, Newport. "It just happened that one of my patients is a producer who suggested I take along some of their recording equipment to keep radio diaries of the mission – I didn't really expect them to see the light of day. The response has been fantastic!"

Operation Smile is one of a number of charities that make use of the US Navy Hospital Ships 'Mercy' and 'Comfort', which carry 1,400 medical staff, 1,000 beds and 12 operating theatres. They even have five on-board CEREC machines! The current Commanding Officer of the USNS Comfort is the first dentist ever to hold the position.

Ships spend four to five months away at a time doing humanitarian work in hard-to-reach destinations. During this time some 90,000 patients are treated, including 1,400 surgeries performed aboard the ship, while volunteer professionals join for two weeks at a time.

Keith works with a team of plastic surgeons, nurses and anaesthetists on cleft palates

and lips. In Papua New Guinea there were many adults with these conditions as no corrective surgery has been available to them as children. It was noticeable that in Kenya this is no longer the case as the charity has worked there annually for 25 years, gradually covering all adult cases so that now only young children recently born with the conditions need treatment. Furthermore, the charity has been able to train local medical professionals to carry out many of the procedures so that by 2009 some 60% of the team were Kenyans – a sign of real progress.

Keith has met and treated many wonderful patients during his missions. One family paddled for three days in an open canoe before spending a further 24 hours on a ferry to reach the ship for treatment for their child.

Keith particularly recalls the case of an 18 year-old with a bilateral cleft lip and palate. He lived in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea and had never been to school because his parents were too ashamed. He couldn't speak and as he drank the liquid would pour out of his nose.



Keith with his 18-year-old patient



The young patient recovers after his life-changing operation

On examination, Keith and the surgeons found that the anterior part of his front maxilla was mobile and he had four rotten front teeth that should normally have been extracted. However, this would have risked pulling jawbone along with them, jeopardising any corrective surgery for the cleft palate. Keith therefore spent a day carrying out root fillings and building up the teeth so they no longer needed to be extracted. The plastic surgeon repaired his palate and lip the following day and the end result is quite amazing.

Keith looks forward to his two-week missions so much that he is almost reluctant to spread the word in case he has to queue behind other dentists scrambling to join them! However, this hugely worthwhile cause is always looking for qualified volunteers so to find out more, visit www.operationssmile.org Keith's BBC Radio Wales documentaries will soon be available on his practice website www.malpasdentalpractice.co.uk



The Hospital Ship USNS Mercy