



INTERPLAST (UK)

SURGICAL CAMP KASHMIR AND ISLAMABAD **13 TO 27 MAY 2012**

At the invitation of Kashmir International Relief Fund (KIRF) Mr Charles Viva, Consultant Plastic Surgeon, took a team of 10 to work in KIRF Community Health Hospital, Jatlan, Mirpur, Kashmir, for one week followed by a week at Benazir Bhutto Hospital, Rawalpindi.

The team consisted of three Plastic Surgeons, two Anaesthetists and other medical and nursing personnel. We encountered difficulty in finding available nurses on this occasion with only one Theatre Nurse on the team.

On arriving in Islamabad we were met by Professor Hamid Hassan whose consistent support and hospitality we have greatly appreciated over the years enabling us to proceed immediately in clinic, patients having already been screened and selected for reconstructive surgery. One hiccup we did encounter was at the border crossing from Pakistan into Kashmir resulting in a long delay whilst passports and visas were scrutinised. We were later given to understand that we were the first such medical charity to work in this hospital/area. No wonder hundreds of people converged on the hospital to take advantage of this amazing offer of free surgery. The charity hospital had publicised the "Surgical Camp" with the title "100 Smiles for Kashmir". However, 300 patients had registered and, apparently, the need was such that this number could have easily reached the 1,000 mark. Some

families had travelled many miles despite the difficulties and lack of transport. Yet they made it – nothing would deter them!

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Our journey by road from Islamabad took us away from the congestion, noise and busyness of the city into a quiet, rural setting of rugged hills and eventually a very flat landscape intercepted by the occasional village and sometimes unexpected large residential properties.

The hospital is situated by the side of a river, on the opposite side of which is a shopping area consisting of numerous make-shift stalls selling livestock (caged chickens), fruit, vegetables and raw meat hanging in the scorching heat. The river also seemed to be used as a place for watering and cooling down the cattle. Camels too were seen by the roadside, perhaps for sale, perhaps for transport.

We were initially greeted and welcomed by members of KIRF and hospital staff surrounded by mothers with their children whose physical needs were very obvious. Cleft lips and burns often result in isolation of the afflicted individual due to the stigma attached to the abnormalities or disfigurement. Perhaps it also results in children being deprived of education as parents try to protect them from becoming targets of bullying etc.

Although the hospital facilities were basic, the Hospital Administration had obviously worked hard to make provision for the patients and for us. With three Surgeons, the patients were soon examined and listed for surgery with operation lists commencing the next day. A large percentage of the patients presented with cleft lips and/or cleft palates or burns. All such disfigurements have a devastating effect on the whole family. Anxious parents brought their children to theatre but their anxiety was turned to joy and relief a day or so later when dressings were removed and the transformation evident, especially following cleft lip repair.

The hospital staff were very helpful, particularly in theatre, showing keen interest to learn from the visiting team and to assist

at every opportunity. Two operating tables were in use during each theatre session and many surgical procedures were carried out during the week. However, despite every effort to treat as many patients as possible, many still remained untreated and therefore a further mission would be planned.

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Communication was hampered in Kashmir as English was generally not understood and our Urdu was non-existent! Fortunately one of our team originated from Pakistan so help was on hand!

We provided gifts of soft toys for the children and assisted recovery with games and crafts, activities which many of the adults enjoyed too!

The depth of appreciation following this mission is evident in the email we received from KIRF on our return to the UK -"we are indebted to you for helping the Kashmiri Community by giving them the gift of a smile, an irreplaceable gift which money cannot buy and all your hard work and selfless commitment towards this goal has helped us to achieve this. KIRF could not have provided this care and treatment to the needy people of Kashmir".

On the following Saturday we returned to Islamabad to attend the official handover of an ambulance by the French Government to Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) with whom we work closely treating many of their patients. On this occasion we were delighted to hear that Valerie Khan's tireless campaigns and negotiations with the Pakistan Government had secured legislation making it a criminal offence to attack anybody with acid. This is an admirable achievement and hopefully will reduce the number of attacks which ruin the lives of young women who are often the victims. Many of these victims are now well known to us having undergone several operative procedures to improve their extensive injuries and horrific scars.

Our week in Benazir Bhutto Hospital facilitated the "9th International Workshop on Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery". The opening ceremony was attended by staff from the hospital

and the Medical College all eager to avail themselves of Mr Viva's teaching and to learn from his surgical techniques. Many patients lined the corridor in Benazir Bhutto Hospital waiting anxiously to see whether our Surgeons could offer them any hope in improving their various deformities and scars. So began a second week of operations, this time assisted by our many colleagues in Benazir Bhutto Hospital where Mr Viva has worked on many occasions and is highly respected for his knowledge and surgical skills. Four operating

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theatres were simultaneously in use daily and the team members along with the local medical and nursing staff were soon working as one team.

Communication with patients and staff was not a problem here as many people understand English and the patients and their families were keen to converse sharing their concerns and stories. It was a privilege to respond to their trust and give reassurance where appropriate. Many just needed a listening ear and a friendly handshake as they faced the unknown ordeal of a visit to theatre. Young ladies with acid burns expressed concerns about their appearance and the fear that this had robbed them of possible marriage. We even shared a "make-up" session with them and encouraged them in every way possible. It was amazing that we as strangers and foreigners were so quickly accepted by them all.

As in Kashmir, the majority of patients presented with cleft lips and/or palates and burns. In the UK we may complain about the endless rules and regulations surrounding health and safety but in Pakistan poor electrical wiring and dodgy looking appliances, use of gas cylinders and kerosene expose people to huge risks. In comparison, the seemingly absent protective legislation results in very poor safety standards and devastating burns. A few patients also presented with tumours, haemangiomas, large naevi and neurofibroma.

The team was kindly invited to a meeting for the Society of Surgeons at the conclusion of the week's Workshop and were given the opportunity to share their experiences of the mission.

Overall, it had been a challenging and humbling experience meeting the needs of so many poor and deprived people but extremely rewarding knowing that lives had been transformed and hope restored. We were privileged to represent the many supporters who make it possible for this work to continue. Our thanks go to companies who have kindly donated medical supplies and to Mr Javed Majid and Raza Jafer whose support and financial assistance facilitate our "surgical camps" in Pakistan.