A CAREER-ENRICHING EXPERIENCE

Volunteering to work on a hospital ship in Africa is a challenge that many nurses find brings them greater confidence and new skills, says Layla Haidrani.

Docked in Toamasina, on the east coast of Madagascar, the world’s largest floating hospital ship is home to hundreds of nurses delivering health care to the world’s fourth-largest island nation.

For nurses who don’t want to play it safe, Mercy Ships is a challenging, yet attractive proposition.

The charity has provided medical support and surgery to 2.9 million people over 37 years. Funded by charitable trusts, churches and schools, the faith-based organisation has operated in 53 developing nations where medical care is limited, including Guinea, Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone. The ships go where they’re needed, creating a legacy by training locals.

Children’s nurse Ella Glass gave up her job at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children to join the 450-strong volunteer team. She spent four and a half months on an island where 90% of the population live on less than 75p per day, and free health care is non-existent.

‘I love the NHS but I knew nursing abroad was a possibility,’ she says. ‘It was the reason I got into nursing initially, but I wanted to work in the UK to hone my skillset before volunteering.’

She was impressed by the Mercy Ships model of care. ‘Many patients had visible physical deformities and as a result were ostracised in their communities. It was incredible to watch patients go through not only a physical but an emotional transformation. In the UK, there...
just isn’t enough time for patient-focused care.’

Ms Glass will soon take up a post as healthcare manager in South Sudan for an international aid organisation.

Laura Gaul took a year’s unpaid leave from her post at King’s College Hospital to volunteer for eight months on the Madagascar ship. King’s College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust nursing director Geraldine Walters says: ‘We are supportive of clinical colleagues who wish to take unpaid leave to volunteer overseas. It can be mutually beneficial; enhancing clinician skills and opening up different ways of working. New ideas can be brought back to the trust to benefit patients here.’

**Expanding skills**

Mercy Ship volunteers stretch themselves, says Ms Gaul. ‘I was responsible for dressings for patients who had facial surgery – something that was not part of my role in the UK.’

She is confident her expanded skills will benefit her career. ‘Communal living can be a struggle with 400 on board, as was sharing a cabin with several girls – but it taught me to cope with the unexpected.’

For many volunteers, returning to the UK is a culture shock. Ms Gaul says it took her three months to readjust to the pace of an NHS ward. Now, she is struck by the good fortune of NHS staff and patients to be in a country where health care can be accessed by all. ‘It was frustrating seeing patients with tumours that could be easily treatable in the west, but are unable to pay for surgery,’ she says. ‘It is sobering to be reminded how privileged we are’ NS

**Working on Mercy Ships**

- Apply three to six months in advance.
- Stints range from two weeks to five years.
- Applicants pay crew fees, insurance, transport and personal expenses. Volunteers must have 75% funding a month before they start.
- Families welcome; 50 children live on board.
- Mercy Ships have visited 451 ports in developing nations.

More at www.mercyships.org.uk

**Funding my trips has not been difficult**

I trained as a children’s nurse in York for three years, working on a ward for five years. **Throughout my career, I kept returning to Mercy Ships because I am passionate about helping people without access to hospitals.**

On the four times that I have volunteered, from nine-day to four-week placements, I’ve done general surgery such as hernias, lipomas and goitres, plastics to reduce movement restriction and, recently, orthopaedic surgery.

Funding my trips hasn’t been particularly difficult; I set up a JustGiving page to cover crew fees and airfare.

Mercy Ships help to create a sustainable future. Local nurses have been mentored, surgeons have been trained and World Health Organization safe anaesthesia/theatre and neonatal resuscitation courses are offered.

This year in Madagascar, the Freedom from Fistula Foundation set up a clinic on land to train local nurses. **When the Mercy ship leaves next June, the clinic will be staying.**

While I haven’t finalised any personal plans to volunteer again, I’d be surprised if I didn’t end up working overseas in the future NS

Cathy Armstrong (pictured right) is a children’s nurse based in Chester and a Mercy Ships volunteer

---

**Mental capacity**

An eight-hour professional development course on the Mental Capacity Act will be held on February 11 in London and March 9 in Manchester. Among the topics to be covered are guiding principles, restraint, deprivation of liberty, wilful neglect and ill-treatment. Delegates will get themselves up to date with legislation and gain an understanding of how it applies in the daily clinical context. Go to tinyurl.com/oy7au4a

**Academic writing**

A masterclass on improving academic writing skills to ensure a successful abstract or article submission will be held on February 9 in London. The interactive workshop is aimed at mature nursing students and students returning to education after a long period away. Topics of discussion will include paraphrasing, note making, critical analysis, academic integrity and referencing. Practice exercises for delegate participation will also be included. Go to tinyurl.com/p4l3q8z

**Peri-operative nursing**

A one-day workshop will focus on caring for patients through surgery. Hosted by RCN on February 26 in London, the interactive workshop will trace the foundations of peri-operative nursing through to practice. There will be a series of presentations, practical case studies and interactive talks focusing on challenges in the field. Delegates expected will be nurses, students and operating department practitioners working in anaesthetics, theatre and recovery. See tinyurl.com/prt56uf or telephone 020 7647 3591.