

GAIA Update

April, 2007 - A Visitor's First Impressions



I am always curious to hear a first-time visitor's impressions of Malawi and of the work we support there. Recently a young physician made the trip and I enclose excerpts, slightly edited, from her report, along with a photo she took of the operating room at one of the rural hospitals. She gives me permission to print these quotes.

William Rankin

"Some general information about Malawi - approximately the size of Connecticut, land locked, bordered on the east by Lake Malawi - 11th largest and 3rd deepest lake in the world. Malawi is typically listed as the 3rd or 4th poorest country in the world. Population - 11 million, of which 1 million are orphans under the age of 15. The average annual income is \$167, about 60 cents per day. 80 - 85% of the population lives in rural villages with no electricity or running water (they have community wells). Malaria and HIV are the top 2 health issues. The infant mortality rate is 104 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 6.6 in the U.S. The maternal mortality rate is 984 per 100,000 live births, contrasted to the U.S.'s 7 per 100,000. There are 10 general surgeons in the country, approximately 16 OB/Gyn's (what I do), 3 orthopedic surgeons, 2 head and neck surgeons, and 2 ophthalmologists.

July 8th - Visiting Salima Aids Service Organization. SASO provides one good meal per week for the kids.....they swarmed us when we started taking pictures & I felt overwhelmed by all the hands reaching out for attention and touch.

July 10th/11th - A rural hospital... a minor surgery room with an inoperable operating table - at least the light works. Midwives wear non-sterile exam gloves when doing deliveries due to a shortage of sterile gloves... old donated scrubs are paper thin... heavy canvas surgical drapes stained, torn and full of holes... nurse with bare feet in the OR... windows open, screens in place but not all intact... occasional fly in the operating room... old instruments that are very difficult to use, incredibly dull scissors, old towels cut up to be used for lap sponges, hand bagging the whole case (no ventilator or anesthesia machine.) My heart sank, my stomach twisted, tears sprang to my eyes - we have so

much, they have so little - the enormity of the problems.

July 12th - St. Andrews clinic and All Saints orphanage near Kasunga all the little ones (2-6) smiling happy faces, mismatched, threadbare clothes... Elizabeth, 3yrs old cute as a button, energetic and bouncy-she stole my heart, wanted to bundle her up and bring her home.

July 15th - Hippo Lodge/Shire River taking a 2 hour boat trip on the Shire River, got to see hippos and elephants - amazing. I'm really missing the boys, the more orphans I see and spend time with, the more I want to gather my boys into my arms for one big long hug. We are so blessed.

July 17th - Blantyre & GAIA headquarters (Global Aids Interfaith Alliance.) Hope comes from the villages we have visited that have income generating activities (growing mushrooms, piggery, bee keeping) - these grass root programs directly help the women and the orphans, are self sustaining and encourage self sufficiency... funded by GAIA in 37 villages so far, expanding to 20 more, slow but steady progress.

July 20th - Another hospital... the reality of the lack of care for women really hit home today. Here they do approximately 1,000 deliveries per month, often have patients laboring on the floor because there aren't enough beds (have 14 beds, have 12 where I work for 280 deliveries per month.) There are 3 MD's and 4 clinical officers to handle all the patients. Preemies - it's "survival of the fittest" as there are no ventilators or functional incubators, no neonatologists so the nurses do the best they can. Every day is a shortage of something vital - gloves, sutures, IV fluids, antibiotics. Each week 4-6 moms die, some times more. Tonight is our last night together as a group. We gathered to do a final check in. I couldn't even speak, tears just rolled down my cheeks - the pain of what I've seen in the past few days and particularly today rose up to the surface...

July 22nd - on my way home. I feel I've been gone for so much longer than 2 weeks, the time spent at the hospitals seems ages and ages ago. The one aspect of Malawi that will stay with me always is the warmth and welcoming nature of the Malawian people. This experience, my reactions and responses to it will stay with me forever as will my desire and determination to assist/help in some way.

How I see the world, those in it and my place in it has been forever changed. Thanks to each of you for your friendship, support and prayers which encouraged me to step out and into a new experience that continues to nourish my heart and soul every day."