

A Long Haul

Hello lovely people: I am aware that this is being written rather later than I would have wanted..... It's been a funny old year I can tell you!

Our cataract work continues. We have now done more than 1,309 eyes; we are chuffed with this. Also, since the last time I wrote to you we have done **a lot** of eye health screenings, treating many, many patients with simple inexpensive medication, handing out advice and eye health education, and of course selecting those who require cataract surgery. We have been told that this really is THE most cost-effective way of using our funds. It certainly pleases the ophthalmic staff to be able to enable their countrymen to take better care of the amazing asset that is good eyesight. Preventing children **making themselves** short sighted in particular!!

It is however a fact that many people present with glaucoma which will end in blindness. It can be held at bay with relatively inexpensive medication costing less than 200 dalasi a month. The problem is that such funds are simply not available to the elderly who are often economically inactive AND, in areas where money for rice and oil is scarce, and families are large.

In my last blog I pasted some photos of the tools that we had had donated by Tool Aid Ringwood. These spent months in our garage. Also, you may remember the pieces of ophthalmic equipment decorating my dining room..... You may also remember that I told you we had two visual field analysers. Alasana Touray our main man at Kanifing was over the moon when he heard about these. Well, then we were offered a third!!! This one is less sophisticated but more robust and capable of being taken up country. We are so grateful.

All the equipment must be checked over before it goes to The Gambia and Gary Evan our lovely ophthalmic equipment magician was asked to visit. However, this was not straightforward, and for many reasons, we had to wait.

Meantime we had been given a huge amount of defunct NHS bits and pieces. I say this because that is exactly what it was. Lynn Hadley who is a retired ophthalmic nurse and friend, approached us telling us that she had been offered quite a bit of 'stuff' from a retired GP and somewhere else.

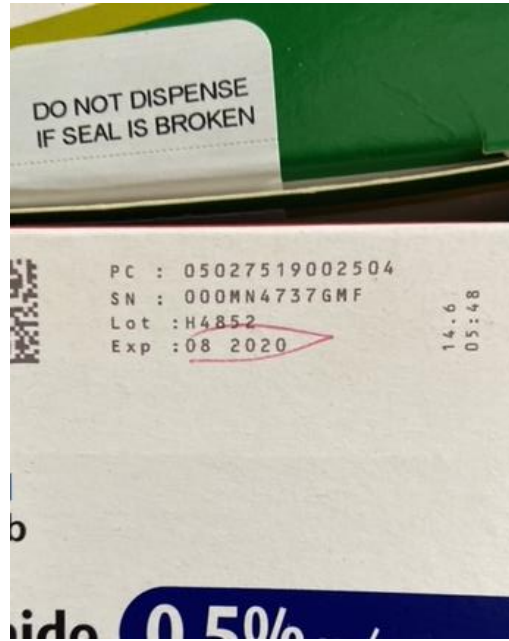
We knew we were sending the tools and other equipment to The Gambia and so we thought that we could use this other 'stuff'. Lynn came with her husband to kindly deliver the goods. Our eyes nearly popped when we realised just how much 'stuff' there was!!!!

They had a vehicle that may be described as a double cab pickup. That is; it was ginormous!! It was **full** of boxes, stuffed with 'stuff'. When we brought them into the house, they filled our hallway. Obviously, there was not much room in our dining room.

When we plucked up the courage to open them, we were almost horrified. Out of date surgical gloves, boxes and boxes of them, different sizes. Different coatings (??). Loads and loads of boxes of face masks obviously left over from the Covid outbreak, again out of date or almost so. Surgical instruments in individual bags marked 'one use' AND out of date. Surgical cloths full of other eye goggling surgical steel instruments. Honestly there was **just so much**. A lot of stethoscopes, and things to examine lady's parts. I could go on.

A baby monitor, breathing tubes, plastic pots, some books and eye health care leaflets.

Also, a great deal of medical drops for various ailments. It was heartbreaking not to be able to use them.



All out of date.

To be fair there was some very useful ophthalmic bits and pieces too, in particular two tonometers, a Perkins and a Reichert. We were well pleased with these!!

What to do?

We took advice and were told to destroy the medication.

We wracked our brains; it is expensive to send things to The Gambia. Then inspiration struck. We thought about Alhagie Camara our long-time friend from our Friends of The Gambia charity days. He is a Gambian who has live in the UK for 30 years practising as a nurse in Wolverhampton. We always knew that his dream was to return home, and 'give back' to his beloved country. He dreamed of developing a Nursing College there which followed the strict protocols of UK hospital practice. He told us once how he had cried when he saw, in a main Gambian hospital a ward orderly using the **same** blood sampling instrument on more than one patient!

Last year, after a long, long, and sometimes frustrating plod, his Nursing College was up and running. It is called **the Sami Institute of Nursing and Health Sciences**, look it up:

<https://www.samiinstitute.co.uk>

Their motto is Transforming Passion into Professionalism. We asked his advice and of course it became obvious that much of our huge haul would be **very useful equipment** for nurse training. Phew!! He assured us **none of it** would be used on real patients but would be magnificent teaching aids. He is a professional!

It took us about two weeks to go through the boxes and sort them. Sadly, some bits had to be scrapped. I do wonder what our refuse collectors made of it all!

Meanwhile, last year, when in The Gambia, I agreed to get some eye patches made to help the eye hospital deal with lazy eye in children. I have various friends who are clever with a needle! One of these friends told me that her sewing group also made pretty dresses and shorts for poor kids overseas, AND would I like some? I thought about the little family me and Jim support, and their extended family way up country. Yes, I said, that would be lovely!

When I went to pick up my booty I was staggered to be given four **large boxes** full of newly made clothing. As well as the promised eye patches.

I could barely tell Jim what was in my car! Again, I had to summon up the courage to begin to inspect my haul.

Oh my word..... They were simply beautifully made dresses and shorts..... they had been separated into age groups from 1 to 16. A handmade draw string bag held three items plus either knickers or pants – in some cases lovely bright T shirts, all newly purchased, What a simply beautiful thought! The label on each bag said “Made with Love by the Sew and Sews”. Wow!!



BUT what to do with so much. Both me and Jim are aware that in the wrong hands these items could be sold - we have been visiting The Gambia for a long, long time.

Because of our experience at Friends of The Gambia we know about the GOVI School for the Blind, and we also know of a great little charity run by Jackie Church called The Glove Project <https://www.gloveproject.life> which helps the very, very poorest families in rural villages. They do many things including paying for surgery and provide prosthetics for child amputees.

These beautiful clothes, except those few I sent a sent to ‘our family’, will be shared between these two charities. This will be overseen by a trusted friend who will meet the consignment when it arrives on 27th July (fingers crossed). I know that both of these registered organisations will share the clothes amongst the most deserving children and their families. I am hoping for some photographs.

Once all of this was sorted into labelled boxes, my dining room became defunct as a useful room. Our dining table piled high and relegated to standing unused next to the Welsh dresser.

Gary Evans managed to get over up to check our goods, and with **him three more slit lamps appeared!!!** Ugh!!, I mean oh joy.

We eventually packed everything ready for transporting to our fabulous crate makers P & D Casemaking.Ltd. in Poole.



We hoped to get it out of the house **before** we took a holiday visiting family in Ireland. BUT no!

Suffice it to say it was still looking at us on our return. So we were relegated to once again eating at the kitchen table!!

Getting the goods transported to P & D was also fraught with difficulties. The sheer bulk of the equipment in its packaging provided a real dilemma for us. It was heavy AND it was fragile. We are both now in our seventies. We have family and friends but fitting in with their schedules and the schedule of the packers was tricky.

I have to say I have rarely been so stressed..... I had been living with some of that equipment for over 18 months. We know that both Alasana at the eye hospital and our friend Alhagie at the Sami Institute were **really excited about getting their hands on** all of this wonderfully useful bounty. Jim's buddy Tim, finally came up trumps and got it down to Poole for us.



When we were called by P & D to collect our crates we were once again staggered by the fact of the size of it all. Three packing cases supplied **FREE OF CHARGE!**

When I saw the size of the crates my heart sank.

As we waited for the gates to open up, one of the (unfunny) case makers grimaced when he spotted our transport and shook his head sadly..... I nearly cried. It was quite an old flat bed truck but it looked fine..... however in my fragile state I imagined the very worst!





All was well though; it went onto the pick-up, albeit piled up..... P & D also loaned Tim straps to hold it securely for its journey. I actually took photos of Tim's lorry springs..... I was so worried.

Once packed, the crates had to be transported to the shippers.

Once again, Tim stepped up and agreed to take them to Peacehaven: a round trip of 240 miles. He wouldn't even take money for diesel. We are SO grateful.



Jim, Tim and our gifts to The Gambia courtesy of all of the gift donors, our supporters and and helpers

The goods have now arrived in Banjul today, 31st July. We will have photographs, I am sure. We have sent instructions to ensure that **every single** thing that was sent, will be utilised for the benefit of our friends in The Gambia.



I am sorry I have spent so much time on explaining all of this to you, but I feel justified in doing so to give you an idea of how kind and thoughtful our supporters are, and to what lengths we will go to support this lovely country.

Violet 31st July 2024