

A Humanitarian Mission with MSF in South Sudan – Challenges of Delivering Paediatric Care During a Civil War

Dr. Kai-ning CHEONG

Resident Specialist in Paediatrics, Queen Mary Hospital, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Paediatric Immunology, Allergy and Infectious Diseases subspecialty trainee

Honorary Tutor in Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, University of Hong Kong

Honorary Clinical Lecturer in Medical Humanities, University of Hong Kong

Bill Marshall Memorial Fund Fellowship awardee 2017

Dr Kai N. Cheong had the privilege of being the first paediatric trainee from Hong Kong to successfully interrupt her paediatric training for a humanitarian mission, all done using her own annual leave. She spent five arduous and rewarding months in South Sudan with the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), working at Gogrial and Doro Refugee Camp field hospitals as the only paediatric doctor (at times only doctor) for those large-scale projects. MSF was able to provide care for general paediatrics, neonatal and paediatric intensive care, and maternity patients; for populations where sometimes they were the only NGO in the area.

In a country still actively at civil war, the vast and overwhelming geopolitical, economical and social problems hampering access to and provision of healthcare, provided innumerable challenges and training opportunities for a young paediatric trainee. Other than being a full-time frontline doctor, she also had to fulfil leadership roles of hospital administrator, manager and educator - and sometimes even cook!

Despite being faced with infectious disease outbreaks, limited healthcare resources and skills, widespread malnutrition - the MSF team was still able to train the next generation of local nurses and staff, drastically reduce infant and maternal mortality rates, and bring some hope to the local population. When faced with helpless medical and ethical situations due to circumstances out of their control, healthcare professionals can still reaffirm the human dignity of their patients - by being present, by bearing witness, and by speaking out.

This is Kai's story with MSF in South Sudan - only one of million stories about humanity that happen daily, that should change how we think about healthcare and medical education globally. It is her hope that sharing it, can bring light to a desperate situation in a country with immeasurable needs.

More importantly, she hopes to underscore how having the opportunity to carry out this kind of service and work, trains young doctors in their communication, empathy, creativity, ingenuity and leadership. This can only ultimately make them better doctors and better human beings, by pushing them to explore and experience the complex lessons of the medical humanities - through living through them and sharing that human connection.