

Meeting Sister Una Brownlie

Una Brownlie accompanied Josephine Soko during her visit to Scotland in February 2010. They both work from the David Gordon Memorial Hospital at Livingstonia, Malawi.

Una was born in Northern Ireland and trained there as a nurse and midwife. She has been working in Africa for over 30 years, going out to Malawi in 1973. There she met her husband and had her 3 children. She moved to Uganda for some 8 years and returned to Malawi in the late 90's



Una set the scene by telling us about DGMH (as it is affectionately known), its surroundings and the people it serves. The hospital, she explained, is a 136 bed referral hospital and serves a population of approximately 70,000, divided between the lakeshore and the hills. There is no permanent fully qualified doctor and the hospital operates with Clinical Officers (trained medical personnel not as highly qualified as a doctor). The maternity department delivers an average of 80 babies per month. Many of the mothers are referred from outlying clinics and a high proportion (approximately 25%) have complications in their pregnancies. There can be cultural difficulties in obtaining help for these women as, in some areas, it is necessary for a woman to obtain the consent of the village chief and her husband before seeking medical help for herself or a child and this can delay the presentation of a patient needing treatment.

The hospital runs 4 static clinics on the lakeshore at Luwichi, Mlowe, Tcharo and Zunga. Luwichi and Mlowe can be reached by road but Tcharo and Zunga necessitate a walk of over 8 hours or a journey in the marine ambulance of up to 2 ½ hours. In the old clinic boat, much of the time was spent bailing, as the boat leaked and the staff are now very appreciative of the new marine ambulance, Good Hope, which was built at Macduff. Communication with these clinics is difficult as mobile phones do not work there and, at present, the radio communication link is not working.

Although Una is part of the management team of the hospital, she much prefers "hands on" nursing, she helps out anywhere that she is needed around the hospital, visits static clinics monthly and also helps Mrs Soko at the outreach clinics and with orphan care. She is responsible for keeping the pharmacy stocked as well as possible with the money available. The cost of drugs at the moment is £2,500.00 per month. Una explained that the government supplies vaccine, anti-viral drugs for HIV patients and drugs to treat malaria. All other drugs and treatment have to be paid for -- for instance a child admitted to the hospital for five days would cost around £5.00 and an adult around £15.00, with drugs and surgical procedures costing more. Many people cannot afford even these charges and the hospital runs a "Good Samaritan Fund" to pay part or all of the charges for the poorest. No one is refused treatment because they cannot pay. The Hospital motto is "CHRIST PEOPLE HEALTH"