



Photography by courtesy of Josias Phiri, Clinical Officer at Palabena RHC, Chongwe District (Our 2019 seasonal competition winner)

SPECIAL “WINTER CAMPAIGN EDITION”

In our last update we reported some excellent progress during the first six months of 2019. YOUR support has enabled the organisation to move forward. We are energised and very excited for the future. We want you to be amongst the first to know we have launched a special Winter Awareness Campaign. Your personal or organisational support has made, and will continue to make, such a difference. The following report shares some of the developments over the past six months and sets out some of the exciting things ahead.

We hope you find this special Winter Campaign Report edition motivating. If you find it interesting, please help us raise awareness by sharing with others. This report is also available to download on our website.

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Update on Operations

As the Virtual Doctors grows, and we build on awareness and expand our reach, the more we can learn and share the benefits that telemedicine will bring to isolated and disadvantaged communities. Raising our profile is thus the focus of our Winter Campaign. We have a lot to say!

We know that there is an appetite for cutting edge technology to help bring about social change, and more specifically a growing desire to ensure that telemedicine is a vehicle to bring healthcare for all, and not just a self-financing commercial model available to those with wealth.

This viewpoint is what underpins the Virtual Doctors service. We now receive a high number of enquiries from countries outside of Africa. We receive the invitations from credible international organisations and stakeholder groups who ask our representatives to speak at events and we see a growing belief in our work illustrated by the number of health professionals who volunteer. We are proud of our achievements to date and we set out some highlights below.

Expansion in Zambia

Our service is currently available in 15 Districts across 5 Provinces of Zambia. The Zambian team have now carried out two successful rounds of all clinic visits, completing face to face questionnaires with every clinical officer using our service, to gather feedback. We now have multiple users across 85 health facilities in the country and with more equipment purchased thanks to your generosity, we are on track to meet our 100 target by the end of 2019.

Thanks to our generous donors, 10 new sites have been set up in 2 new districts in Central Province this autumn: 6 users in 4 sites in Chitambo in September, with the support of charitable organisation Friends of Chitambo Hospital and 5 sites and users in Mkushi in October. Below is an extract from the recent Mkushi training (photo right) report issued by our Zambian team, which gives a good insight into how a new Virtual Doctors site is brought into operation:



"We've trained four nurses and one clinical officer on how to use the Virtual Doctors' system with great success. We spent time together sending test cases and testing to ensure that the all devices were working properly. We also met with the Clinical Care Officer and the acting District Health Director to discuss the training and expectations of the programme. We also showed them simple troubleshooting techniques".

Shakerrie Allmond and Stella Chitembo. VDRs Zambian team



In a collaborative partnership with Zayohub, we have implemented our service in 3 of their sites (1 in Kazungula and 2 in Mwandia Districts) and are planning to scale up to additional sites over the next months. [ZayoHub](#) is building a network of community hubs in remote locations in rural Zambia so there is synergy.

At the time of print our Field Assistant Stellah is busy training Clinical officers in 10 more sites in Mkushi (5) and Chitambo (5) and this rolling programme of expansion will continue. It becomes far more cost effective to set up clusters of sites which maximises our resourcing not only saving costs with travel but also putting team time spent out in the field to best effect.

Clinic Spotlight

Our Zambian team have introduced a Monthly Clinic Spotlight to be shared on social media. This not only provides interesting reading for our UK supporters, but it also motivates the Clinical Officers and encourages them to connect their interest with the organisation in a different way and with each other. We raise the profile of the highest performing clinic each month through our WhatsApp Group and via a Clinical Officer monthly newsletter.

A typical Clinic in Zambia

Conditions in local health clinics are variable, but they are typically basic and under-resourced. Some District hospitals are better equipped but may be located long distances away from the clinics so referrals can be an issue, involving long and difficult journeys, adding to the hardship of the patients and their families. **Zambian Helpers** is one of these bigger health centres:

Zambian Helpers is located in Chilanga District (Lusaka Province of Zambia), half-way between the Zambian capital, Lusaka, and Kafue town. The population catchment area is 11,540. It is run by faith based, charitable organisation the **Zambian Helpers Society** in co-operation with the government of the republic of Zambia and managed by the Daughters of the Redeemer Sisters. It was registered and opened to the community in 2001 and has been a Virtual Doctor site since October 2018, sharing boundaries with other health centres which receive our service, namely Chilanga, Chipapa and Shimabala.

With 14 rooms it is bigger than the average Rural Health Centre, featuring a lab and several wards (male, female and children's). 70+ patients are seen daily, coming from as far as 30km away. Clinical Officer (CO) Victor Mulenga is a high user with over 200 cases submitted since he started using the service a year ago. He is a great role model for other COs to follow.

"I have worked with Virtual doctors from 2018 October. it has helped me to improve quality skills, learn new ideas and management of patients. it's so interesting to have connection with doctors around the world specifically from UK, we really learn a lot from them."



Virtual doctors have helped to reduce unnecessary referrals because Doctors support us with diagnosis and treatment advice for complicated cases".



The **Zambian Helpers Mission** is twinned with the UK, King Edward Street Medical Practise in Oxford under our Clinic Twinning Scheme.

One of our Volunteer Doctors (pictured left Nikki Hall, an Ophthalmology Registrar from Edinburgh) had the opportunity to meet the local team and our beneficiaries, visiting the aforementioned **Zambian Helpers Mission** with Stellah whilst on a trip to Zambia recently.

Director of **Zambian Operations**, Shakerrie Allmond and her assistant Stellah Chitembo met recently with the Provincial Medical Director for Copperbelt Province to discuss new expansion sites for December. There is currently no *Technical Working Group* for eHealth in Zambia and Dr Shampile, the VDr's point of contact at the MoH, suggested the VDr's help set one up. Forging positive relationships and networks in Zambia is something we are very keen to do.

Malawi Pilot Update

Our trial in Malawi has now been completed. We have 12 of our Virtual Doctors dedicated to receiving cases through a partitioned part of our site dedicated to cases from Malawi as the patient cases coming in from a new country had to be separated out from those in Zambia. To date we have received 150 complex cases from the 6 trial sites (Lemwe, Chiunjiza, Mbangomba, Ngoni, Ukwe, and Nsalu) in Lilongwe District and are now evaluating the outcomes of the trial analysing the cases handled and initial feedback from the Clinical Officers (CO's). Our **Zambian team** will travel to Malawi in January 2020 to for a more comprehensive field evaluation with face to face interviews with the CO's and the Ministry of Health in Lilongwe.

Those who supported our Malawi appeal have made a significant impact for us. The trial has effectively been a "test bed" for the take up of the service in another country. A significant amount of learning has resulted, sweetening us on a sound footing for the future and is being built into our organisational strategy and resource planning. We cannot overstate the value of this learning and the impact this will have on the roll out of our service going forward and for other countries in the region.

Clinical Officer George with VDRs Team member, Stella Chilembo during training in Ukwe Rural Health Centre



Some challenges we have faced

Our resolve has been tested but remains undaunted. We truly believe that this service will benefit rural populations of Malawi and remain committed to the service delivery. However, some issues have been beyond our control:

- the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), without which we cannot operate, still awaits Ministry of Health signing off.
- Technical issues around the need to compartmentalise our technology to partition cases from Malawi and Zambia: we had to create two separate sites to be accessed by users and assign a separate workforce of volunteer doctors to Malawi. We also needed to address the wider modifications required to upgrade our system which will be subject to a further funding bid. Indeed, compared to Zambia, Malawi users have shown a higher interest for an app-only model of our service, whereby the app is downloaded on the user's personal device.
- Usage: By only having 12 volunteer Doctors answering cases and only 6 sites instead of the intended 8, (and with one site underperforming), the number of specialities we were able to handle from Malawi was a limiting factor. However, despite this the 150 cases received will be sufficient for us to evaluate the trial further.

What our stakeholders say

Clinical Officer feedback

Recent comments from our M&E exercise reinforce the educational benefits the Clinical Officers (COs) derive from their interactions with volunteer doctors, and the increased knowledge-sharing among fellow medical professionals and the community:

"My knowledge of Clinical care has increased with the interactions made with Virtual Doctors" – Anthony, CO at Lemwe Rural Health Centre in Malawi.

..."I think one of the contributing factors to the top case submission is our district being new and thus we have no diagnostic facilities: The nearest hospital is Levy Mwanawasa and it's about 96km away from here. The point is that most of our cases are treated clinically because we do not have a lab at each facility except one facility which is Nampundwe and the lab was just recently opened and thus is not fully fledged. Therefore, we rely on consultations to manage unique cases that do not need to be referred and our referral system for outpatient services is mainly based on self-transport basis unless medical emergencies only. So it is likely that we will continue consulting to improve on our case management as most of the people cannot even afford to go for further investigations such as scan, x-ray, FBC etc." - CO from new district Shibuyunji District.

Volunteer Doctor feedback:

"Just to report back that I am finding the Virtual Doctors system is working well. The cases sent across have been interesting and challenging. It has been very helpful to have spent time in Tanzania to be able to place things in context. Thus far I have managed 4 cases." (10 oct) – New/recent recruit David Morris.

An endorsement from a supporter

The Chalker Foundation for Africa Foundation Head says: *"the Chalker Foundation has been supporting the work of the Charity for a number of years, including their work in Zambia and in Malawi. We have found their programmes and*

interventions to be of high impact and far reaching and their ability to work in partnership with local partners and government bodies very impressive. Virtual Doctors is a small but progressive organisation. We have been thoroughly satisfied with the quality of their monitoring reports and impressed by the quality of their governance and leadership”.

Nov19 Ajay Mehta

In the Field

Case Study - Elephant attack

One case which stood out was a man who had been attacked by an elephant and who was badly wounded with his injuries causing many complications. The receiving Virtual Doctor was able to offer some prompt advice, which enabled the Clinical Officer to stabilise the patient. Unfortunately, despite best efforts and prompt advice of our volunteer and the Clinical Officer calling an ambulance, which took long to reach the patient to take him to hospital, he sadly did not survive. This does remind us that in rural areas like this, what we here in the UK perceive as an emergency service may not always mirror what we are used to. Pictured right – a typical motorcycle ambulance spotted in a health centre visited by some of our team last year.



Case Study - Delusional state

A 29-year-old man presented to Nsaru Health Centre with delusional thoughts. He believed somebody was trying to kill him. He was talkative, confused, and disorientated of time and place. He had a high temperature and a history of alcoholism. There were several possible causes of this man's condition, some of which had the potential to be serious. These included an acute confusional state secondary to infection and/or alcohol, serious mental illness, or an infection of the brain. The volunteer doctor discussed each of the scenarios and how the Clinical Officer may be able to assess further to distinguish between these causes. An appropriate course of action and a treatment plan was discussed for each. Although the patient still required an onward referral, the Clinical Officer found the volunteer Doctors response fully answered his questions, was educational, and helped him formulate a satisfactory management plan for the patient.

Other cases have much happier outcomes and some of these can be found on our website.

Volunteer activities

Our team of volunteer Virtual Doctors now stands at 106 and are supported and guided by a Medical Team of 6 members lead by Dr Simon Gazeley. Many volunteer for us because our service offers the opportunity to help on a regular basis, rather than having to take sabbaticals abroad. The internet has truly expanded our world and for those busy medical professionals who want to do good, our service is offering arms-length volunteering channelling their skills directly where support is needed the most.

“Our volunteer doctors are our USP. I don’t know of any other telemedicine service that can boast that they have over 100 fantastic highly qualified medical professionals all giving their time and expertise for free and, what’s more, we receive enquiries daily from others wanting to help. That support is priceless.”

Ian Kerr, Chair of the Board.



Pictured above, volunteer Dr Jo Withers on an awareness stand at the World Extreme Medicine Conference at Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh.

Many of these doctors are engaged in other ways too. Doctors Jo Loveridge and Jo Withers joined a 9 strong team running in the Royal Parks Half Marathon in October. Others help by raising awareness at conferences, events or giving talks.

New volunteer, Sheila Harty will be taking up an appointment as Board Secretary effective from 3 December. She will be supporting the Board of Trustees in their Governance activities.

We are currently advertising for a volunteer to assist with fundraising in our administrative office in Worthing, West Sussex.

More to come

- Our discussions with a potential partner to set up a site on Mageta Island, Lake Victoria in Western Kenya are progressing. We are also looking at an opportunity in Uganda.
- Our fundraising team will be supplemented by the services of a Zambian fundraising Consultant, Chupa Phiri who will be focussing on trust and foundation applications in the UK



Add a date to your diary to listen in to our BBC Radio 4 appeal being made by Simon Mayo on Sunday 19th January 2020 at 07.54 am and 21.25 pm.

You can support our [Winter Campaign here](#) or go to our website's *Support Us* section/*Festive and Fund*.

Finally

We need to continue to be bold and therefore hope you may agree to continue to support our cause. Your ongoing support is making a considerable difference and we could not do what we do without your support.

THANK YOU.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'HJ'.

Huw Jones - Executive Director

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Ian Kerr'.

Ian Kerr Chairman of Board of Trustees

For more information go to www.virtualdoctors.org

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