



WASH kit arriving at Chilanga District

The Virtual Doctors & the New Normal

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The Virtual Doctors is the UK's leading primary health care international Telemedicine charity and the largest charitable telemedicine provider in Zambia with a small pilot currently running in Malawi. The organisation's principal aim is to improve primary healthcare and prevent unnecessary referrals to hospitals. Using a Smartphone App, the service connects isolated health centres in rural Zambia with volunteer doctors, based predominantly in the UK.

Update on our Operations

Expansion

Our service has expanded considerably since our Summer report. The Virtual Doctors telemedicine service is available in 233 health facilities (rural health centres and some district hospitals) in 37 Districts across 5 Provinces in **Zambia**, covering a population catchment of about 3.5 million people (20% of the population).

In September we expanded the service to 65 health facilities in Eastern Province. Many of the Districts are in deep rural areas where access to primary health care is most challenged. We had a target of 268 centres set up with our service by the end of 2020, which would mean the Virtual Doctors presence in every province in Zambia, translating to full countrywide coverage of our service. However, with the increase in the number of sites, comes the increase in the number of patient cases being handled by our volunteer Doctors. Recruiting more volunteer Doctors is challenging, especially during the pandemic when workloads for some hospital Doctors and GPs are uncertain. We have therefore decided to set up remaining sites in stages with some set up in December and the rest in January next year. This allows time for us to spread the word and recruit more volunteer Doctors to meet the increase in demand.

Digital Education

The team in Lusaka have digitised the COVID-19 infection control curriculum in partnership with the Zambia Institute of Public Health (ZNPHI). In October they started a series of monthly **Virtual Healthcare Show & Tell** broadcasts, as a platform for front-line health workers to interact and share their knowledge and to receive feedback from peers and specialists from around the world. Three episodes have been broadcast; episode 1 is available to watch: [part 1 here](#) and [part 2 here](#).

In an effort to facilitate feedback and data for decision making, we have created a feedback cycle that incorporates the Clinical Care Officers and provides them with metric data for management decision making. This approach has been very successful; Clinical Officers (COs) engage with senior management about digital health and our telemedicine solution. We have also introduced Quality Metric Assessments or QMA indicators that are geared toward increasing positive clinical outcomes and decreasing counterproductive behaviour in case management.

On the Medical Team side, the clinical forum, which is a set of educational resources designed to support the COs ongoing professional development, has been re-designed as a mobile phone app so that it can be used seamlessly on devices alongside the VDr's consultation app. The Team has also been providing weekly educational case reports directly to the COs via their WhatsApp group to help stimulate discussion and enhance their learning; these have been well received. Further building on the peer-community WhatsApp group, Educational Lead Dr Jo Loveridge has been producing new practical documents for the exclusive use of the CO Support Group.

Malawi

We signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Health in April to extend our service beyond the current 5 pilot health facility sites in Lilongwe District. However, in June the country held national elections resulting in a change of government. This required that we temporarily cease engagement to allow for the bedding-in process of the new government to proceed. Discussions have only just begun again with the new team at the Ministry of Health and we have agreed as part of the next steps to develop a plan for significant expansion into all nine Districts of Central Province of Malawi starting in early 2021, with a projected 56 sites to set up with our service. Currently we are in the process of writing a concept note to adapt the service to the needs of the Malawi Ministry of Health.



Clinical Officer Spotlight

Talent Mauluka is the resident Clinical Officer at Busa Rural Health Post in Luano District of Central province, Zambia, where he handles all VCT (voluntary counselling and testing) and OPD (outpatient department) cases and manages ART (anti-retroviral therapy) as well as maternal & child health services.

He joined the Virtual Doctors in March 2020 and says “it has been an exciting journey. The Virtual Doctors are very helpful by providing me with the right treatment and diagnosis in many cases I consulted from them, in turn the patient receives a cost effective and affordable treatment at the right time. The most important thing I love about the Virtual Doctors is getting the correct Diagnosis from the Specialists within 24 hours”.

Hobbies include motorcycle riding, reading novels and singing.

Case studies

Telemedicine is certainly challenging, as many UK Doctors have discovered over recent months. Much of the Art of Medicine relies upon direct Patient-Doctor interaction; being able to tell immediately ‘from the end of the bed’ that someone is acutely unwell, understanding a patient’s concerns through non-verbal communication, eliciting clinical signs using expert examination skills and so on. Moving consultations to phone or screen might risk losing some of the vital benefits of real face-to-face interactions.

At Virtual Doctors we aim to use Digital health to share our clinical skills. As a Volunteer it can be difficult at first to adapt to our model of remote consultation. But with our Telemedicine system we have a Clinician on site who is face-to-face with the patient. They are practising the Art of Medicine for us. We rely on the Clinical Officers to gather all the relevant information and to look for clinical clues on examination. Together we can then formulate an appropriate management plan for the patient. With ongoing feedback and education, we aim to optimise the skills of local clinicians, not just with the aim of facilitating effective referrals but with the goal of empowering them and improving patient care.

[Read on here](#) for two cases where the Clinical Officers were able to provide a clear description of the patient’s problem; they used our Telemedicine service to help them make sense of their findings and to understand the next steps in management. Even though the Doctors involved in these cases were at a distance, they were confident in their diagnoses. There was a Clinician face-to-face with the patient to ensure that the appropriate management plan was enacted swiftly. Both cases had a good outcome and the Clinical Officers felt they had gained valuable experience for the future. (Dr Jo Loveridge, the Virtual Doctors Education Lead)

Other case studies can be found [on our website](#).

The pandemic in Zambia – the new normal

The Virtual Doctors’ COVID-19 Response Fund was launched on 22 April 2020 to support our **ongoing partnership with the Zambian Government** (helping them improve access to quality health care) and their effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with the aim to ensure that we can continue to provide vital telemedicine and educational support to the health facilities we work with in rural Zambia.

By July 2020 we had equipped the 140 health facilities we supported at the time. We have since deployed our service *along with the Covid prevention WASH kits* to a further 93 health facilities, taking us to 233 sites across the country who are now also fully equipped to help prevent the spread of Covid. We were able to deliver below budget, saving on costs where we could, allowing us to go further with our generous donors’ contributions.

We have made our Covid response initiative part of the **new normal** and now provide WASH supplies with our telemedicine devices whenever we introduce the service to a new site in rural Zambia. This ensures that each health facility is better equipped to combat Covid while the pandemic continues.

Covid travel restrictions have changed the way we train Clinical Officers (COs) and set up our service in new health facilities: instead of sending our team into the field to deliver devices and training, we work with Ministry of Health colleagues to send Covid kits and telemedicine devices to the local District Health Office by bus, where they are then sent on to the designated Rural Health Centres.

We have also developed a **new, virtual, training model** based on a “Training the Trainers” concept: Clinical Care Officers (CCOs) (most senior Clinical Officers (COs) responsible for managing all COs in their district) are trained remotely over Zoom by the VDRs team in Lusaka, so that they are able to train COs in their Districts to use the VDRs telemedicine service. On the day of training, 6-10 COs are trained together at the DHO by the CCOs. The training is backed up with support from the team in Lusaka via Zoom.

This new model not only allows us to by-pass Coronavirus-related obstacles and is another step towards our ultimate aim of institutionalising the service into the health system but will also enable us to redirect cost savings towards COVID-19 prevention activities and beyond – an exciting development and direction for the Virtual Doctors: turning a threat into an opportunity and going further virtually while continuing to enrich the quality of healthcare service delivery where it’s needed most.



Clinical Liaison Specialist Pralin Koongo dispensing virtual training from the VDRs Lusaka office.

Monitoring & Evaluation

After securing transformational funding for our impact assessment we have recruited the services of a Zambian Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning consultancy company who will spend the next 6 months carrying out internal and external Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E). This includes designing the VDRs M&E framework, training the VDRs Zambia team for improved M&E skills and higher quality M&E continuity, and finally writing the comprehensive evaluation report which we expect will be complete by early May 2021. This will be invaluable for the consolidation of our growing service and to provide our donors and stakeholders comprehensive evidence of the impact of their investment for our beneficiaries and their communities.

Income generation

In the face of contemporary challenges around fundraising and lower income which has been shared sector-wide, we are currently focusing on developing our Virtual Community Fundraising with our #StayAtHome Challenge / Fundraise from Home initiative, to help our supporters overcome social restrictions and their impact on individual fundraising. Our signature sports event the Royal Parks Half-Marathon is expected to take place in October 2021 and our 10 places are up for grabs.

Donors have been very supportive of our Covid-19 Response in Zambia, as outlined in our summer report. The funds raised from this campaign enabled us to protect our service users and their communities by providing them with Covid-prevention WASH kits and additional educational resources. The appeal is ongoing to ensure our existing and new facilities are equipped with WASH kits and adequate WASH supplies.

Another focus will be to obtain funding for technical updates to improve our telemedicine system which is ongoing as we strive to ensure our service meet the needs of the users in the field, the ministry of health and the volunteer doctors consulting on complex cases.

Medical Team & other Volunteers



As of November 2020, patient cases from Zambia and Malawi are now handled by more than **187 volunteer doctors** across the UK (see left), covering 25 medical specialities.

The virtual community platform Slack has recently been introduced to improve the way we connect the volunteers, so they can interact with each other and share interesting learning points and information.

All of the volunteer doctors received a COVID update in the middle of October and are aware of what to do if they are referred a potential Covid case through the VDr system.

The Medical Team have successfully recruited several ENT consultants and have also been targeting paediatricians, obstetricians, gynaecologists, and sexual health specialists. They are working to mobilise more volunteers for the medical specialties that need more Doctors. This has been harder because of the added demands placed upon all NHS staff with the ongoing pandemic.

With expansion and growing case numbers come an urgent need to recruit more volunteer doctors. We appreciate this challenge as a collateral of growth and extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Virtual Doctors old and new who make our telemedicine service possible.

We still urgently need support from volunteer specialists in paediatrics, obstetrics, gynaecology, and Genito-Urinary Medicine. If you know any Doctors who may be interested in volunteering – *please spread the word!*

[Watch here](#) some of our medical volunteers talk about their experience as Virtual Doctors.

On the technical side, we have gained the support of two new IT Tech Support volunteers to ease the ever-growing workload of our volunteer IT guru Terry Cann and our legendary Development team of Lavan, Jon and Nick, who are always working on improving the app and system.

What our Stakeholders say (verbatim)

"Congratulations VDr's. You are an inspiration for the Clinicians in the country! We Thank God for the service." Victor Mulenga, Zambian Helpers, Chilanga District, Lusaka Province, in response to one of our monthly newsletters.

"am really enjoying the VDr's network. The doctors are quick to respond to the referrals and their advice are great, very helpful and educative. The VDr's are super fantastic." Serah Chibale, Mawanda Zonal Health Centre, Lusangazi District, Eastern Province.

"Virtual doctors as an organisation is a true and dedicated partner in fight against the disease burden in our communities. It feels so great to be part of this organization and thank u for making our work much lighter as clinicians." Lawrence Shawa, Chibombo Rural Health Centre, Chibombo District, Central Province.

Outlook

We look forward to the year ahead in 2021. With talks with the Malawi Ministry on-going, we hope to take our service beyond the current 5 pilot sites and expand to all nine Districts of Central Province, ensuring we adapt our service to the needs of the Malawi health system and health workers in the Districts.

In Zambia we continue to gradually transition to an institutionalised service in the Ministry of Health with on-going change management in the Districts as a key component of the transition as well as on-going show and tell to strengthen solidarity with the stakeholders who use our service. If funding allows, we will continue to expand our service in Zambia to new health facilities and Districts in deep rural communities with the most challenged access to primary health care. Our current Monitoring and Evaluation exercise will culminate with a comprehensive evaluation report by May next year and we look forward to sharing the outcomes.

Finally – from our Chair

What a year! The year that the world realised that we were so interdependent in so many ways. The year that technology finally showed its ability to be right at the heart of healthcare. And what a year for the Virtual Doctors teams that have been on this mission for a decade and more. A massive thank you to the 187 NHS volunteers who not only served the UK but after a long shift then supported rural communities in Zambia and Malawi.

The Clinical Officers we support with telemedicine in 233 front line healthcare centers in Zambia have requested support for over 3,000 complex patient cases to the Virtual Doctors Service this year. This is the most healthcare centres supported in our history and the highest number of volunteers serving the most patients in a single year. The Virtual Doctors teams have been simply amazing, it's been our best year to date. This impact has all been fuelled by your kind and generous donations.

So what will 2021 bring? Respite? - No, we have more healthcare inequalities to right. More people to help, more volunteers to support and new areas to understand including a focus on the increasing number of Gynecological and Obstetric cases and the increasing trends that Climate Change is playing out on rural patients' lives. Our aim by 2025 is to provide 750 rural health workers in Africa with access to medical knowledge that will improve the health of 18,000 people per year.

So. Can you do something to get us to our mission quicker? If you have supported us in 2020, thank you. If you like what we do: please tell people around you. And finally, if you have ideas, contacts or views on what we could do differently or better, then please let us know.

Best Wishes to you and yours during the December festivities

Graham, Chair, the Virtual Doctors

We hope you find this Report inspiring and if you do, we ask you to help us raise awareness by sharing with others. A digital version is also available to download on our [website](#) news section and you can follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#).

Huw Jones - Executive Director

Graham Precey Chairman of Board of Trustees

December 2020

APPENDIX *Based on usage data from Zambia and Malawi*

