



Dear family, friends & supporters,

Greetings from Sierra Leone, having reported on our voyage to Freetown back in the summer, an update is now long overdue and as many people have been asking, we thought we'd share a bit about the hospital...

Mercy Ships' mission has evolved over the four decades that the charity has been in existence. Today, they focus specifically on the provision of safe surgery and the development of medical capacity in host nations through education, training and advocacy. Safe surgery is delivered in the onboard hospital, which occupies two decks in the lower part of the ship. Once we had docked in Freetown new faces began to arrive on a daily basis as the medical volunteers joined and the hospital quickly came to life. Prior to surgery commencing, there was an opportunity for the crew to take a tour and see the hospital in "operation" during the open house. In this blog we are going to share with you the typical journey of a patient who undergoes surgery during a field service (you might recognise some of the "patients" trying out the hospital equipment and their attendants)!

Prior to the ship arriving, potential patients are pre-screened by medical teams who travel across the host nation, assessing people in villages and towns. Those who are possible candidates for surgery are given an appointment onboard and, once the ship is in port, provided with transport to Freetown.

As people have often had to travel for days and leave home far behind, Mercy Ships provides them with secure accommodation at the Hospital Outpatient Extension (Hope) Centre – in this case, that's a repurposed clinic 3 miles away from the ship in the heart of Freetown. Patients wait at the Hope Centre for an appointment with the ship's preoperative team.

Preop appointments are where patients are seen by the ship's



*Blog 3 – The hospital*

medics for the first time. To assist with diagnosis the hospital is equipped with X-ray and a CT scanner. Various tests are carried out and surgeons assess the patient to make a final decision on whether or not surgery is viable. Factors that may influence this difficult decision include the general health of the patient including nutrition and blood pressure, HIV status and the nature of the issue. Saying no to a patient is one of the hardest parts of the process and the medical staff are supported by a team of chaplains from the host nation. In some cases, patients leave without surgery but go on to receive support at home from the ship's palliative care nursing team.

For those who are able to have surgery, they are admitted to one of the ship's wards. In some cases, patients will need days or weeks of nutrition to build up their body weight and strength before surgery can be considered.



Surgery takes place in the operating theatre. There are 6 state of the art operating rooms in a sterile core at the centre of the hospital. Over the course of the field service, different types of surgery will take place in short blocks performed by specialist surgeons, doctors and nurses who join for a short period to supplement the other teams. This field service started with a

block of general surgery, treating issues such as hernias, before maxillofacial surgery commenced. Many of the patients present with tumours and other issues which have gone untreated for many years, resulting in conditions which would be unimaginable in Europe.

Post-op, the patients return to the wards. The ship has 5 wards and an intensive care unit. Patients can bring a carer with them, so the ward beds are modified with a lower bunk for the family member!

There is also a low care unit and a physiotherapy suite, where plastic and reconstructive surgery patients receive treatment. Once a patient has healed sufficiently, they can be released back to the HOPE Centre to continue their recovery before final discharge.





In our daily routine we don't have much direct interaction with the patients. Non-medical staff are, however, encouraged to visit the wards, meet the patients and spend time with them – something we've been doing and will share in a later blog. In the meantime, here are some links to the stories of actual patients from recent field services.

<https://www.mercyships.org.uk/who-we-serve/patient-stories/>

Thank you, as always, for your love, prayers and thoughts,

Ian, Elizma, Abigail & Piran