

Bulawayo Breast Surgery Course, Zimbabwe, July 2019

A team of 8 self-funding doctors and nurses ran the first ever ABS course in Sub Saharan Africa. The course was attended by 80 delegates from 8 African countries, and included 33 nurses. We ran didactic lectures and small group tutorials and practical sessions (USS guided core biopsy, SLNB, mark up for LD flaps etc.) It was a 3 day course where we covered topics from basic anatomy and pathology to principles of flaps for skin cover.

The President Elect of COSECSA, Professor Muguti, attended the course and was keen to set up a long-term relationship with ABS. The hospitality of the hosts was remarkable; nothing was too much trouble. Dr Magara and his team did a fantastic job. The organisation was very professional and they even had scanned delegate badges that told the organisers if delegates wandered more than a mile away from the conference centre to calculate accurately their CPD points! (Can you imagine introducing that here?)

The dedication of the delegates and participants was unbelievable. We started at 8am every day and finished at 7pm and no one left. Even during the numerous power cuts we sat in the dark and continued the MDT discussions! We had an MCQ evaluation before and after the course and we awarded 2 prizes, one for the highest score in the final test and one for the most improved. We also had a course evaluation form with requests for feedback. The feedback was very positive and there is great appetite to improve the care of breast cancer patients in Zimbabwe.

We have hence formed a partnership with United Bulawayo Hospitals to produce a “Needs Analysis” document looking at the barriers and limitations they currently face with a grant from THET. Dick Rainsbury is leading on this project and returned to Bulawayo in October to get it started. If this report is accepted and selected by THET and Johnson and Johnson, we could get a grant of up to £80K to improve their infrastructure.



Healthcare even in the government hospitals is not free and many cannot afford tests, let alone treatment. There is so much we take for granted here and sitting in on their MDT discussions was a complete eye opener. For example, the mammogram machine in the big teaching hospital had not been working for 3 months, so no mammograms were available. The pathology report said, “Invasive breast cancer- Grade and receptor status can be made available at extra cost”

Our nurses put in a lot of work and ran parallel sessions. Mrs Janet Hicks even wrote a story book with illustrations for the African children about dealing with bereavement, called “Look for the Rainbow”, as she realised that the materials available here would be totally irrelevant for the children there.

This is what Lis Grimsey had to say about their experience in Bulawayo,

“Janet Hicks (Breast Care Nurse Specialist - retired) and I were very fortunate to have the opportunity to go on the Zimbabwe trip. Our brief was to teach the nurses. It took a lot of preparation and multiple discussions to plan the teaching sessions as it was hard to ascertain their needs and we were uncertain of the number of nurses attending.

In the end we had 30 nurses who attend our twice daily two-hour sessions. They took a little while to warm up, but they then became a very engaging group. They came mainly from clinics, theatre, palliative care and the community. They have no dedicated breast care nurses in Zimbabwe however it became very apparent the important role the nurses play in liaising with the women and influencing them. It was heart breaking hearing some of the stories. Sadly, traditional healers still play a major role especially in the rural areas. There are many taboos and we spent some time discussing these with the help of Brenda, a local Zimbabwean nurse, to see how these could be broken.

It was a huge privilege to teach these nurses who were like sponges absorbing all the information. We also had some fun with them engaging them in a quiz, with prizes! They love British chocolate! The nurses there have many challenges and I hope we have educated and inspired them. Not only do they have challenges in the workplace, but the current financial situation in Zimbabwe means that their salaries are not even covering their rent!”



This course also brought the visiting ABS members closer together and we formed lasting friendships. As members were going in their own time and paying for themselves, I felt it was important that there was some downtime, to reflect, discuss and spend some time together before getting back to our busy lives here. After 3 days of teaching we spent a day at Hwange National Park and a day at Victoria Falls before flying back. Every member of the team was happy to have been involved and would gladly join future ABS ventures.



**Leena Chagla and Lis Grimsey
on behalf of the rest of the visiting team of Dick Rainsbury, Jerome Pereira, Mike McKirdy,
Sankaran Narayan, Sean Desmond and Janet Hicks**