

## **My Bangladesh adventures – from St Austell to Bangladesh**

I think we all have dreams don't we? I used to say to our daughter (our only child) that when she had got through university and settled that I was going to volunteer in Mother Teresa's orphanage and home for the dying in Calcutta, I'm a nurse by profession. It was 4<sup>th</sup> December 1990 when our precious daughter died suddenly leaving us bereaved and devastated wondering what God had in store for us now. We had to rediscover our whole purpose in life it was harrowing times.

Our family and church family was supportive to us, my work kept me so busy that I realised I used being busy and work as a crutch to get through each day. I cried so much when I wasn't working, a real difficult time, no adjectives to describe our situation.

After 2 years my husband, who was so supportive, agreed to me taking a sabbatical from my work and I applied to Mother Teresa's community to volunteer in Calcutta. I was accepted, but my husband wasn't happy as you had to find your own accommodation and he was worried that if I was having a "bad day" there was no support. Its amazing as one door closes another opens. I was at a lunch meeting for a carers group that I had started and sat next to the local vicar. I shared with him the need for me to have a sabbatical and he told me that he had a vicar friend who was a trustee of a spinal injury hospital in Bangladesh, they needed a nurse to train the nurses in wound management and bladder and bowel management. These were my skills, but I really wanted to go to Calcutta to work along side the missionaries of charity. However, he gave me this vicars name and contact details.

My husband and I went to see this vicar in Kent, and he told us all about the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed based 17 miles outside the capital city of Dhaka. Valerie Taylor was a young physiotherapist doing voluntary work for VSO in the 1960s and was appalled at the lack of facilities for paralysed people. Valerie had vision, inspiration and drive and eventually set up the hospital based at Savar, she was given a piece of land by a wealthy Bangladeshi businessman on which to build a hospital and rehabilitation centre for the poorest of people and others who had incurred a spinal injury and the rest is history. This has taken a lot of prayer, with people all over the world raising funds.

After our visit to Kent, I still felt that I was called to volunteer in Calcutta, so I continued with my work here in Cornwall. It was one day that I was dressing a patient's leg ulcer that I had an overwhelming feeling that God was asking me to go to Bangladesh. I contacted Valerie and the NHS Trust and agreed that I could take a 4-month sabbatical, my husband also asked his employer for 4 months off but, due to his role, this was refused but he was happy for me to go alone. This was the start of my Bangladeshi adventure that would become life changing. We started fund raising for specific wound dressings for pressure ulcers. Our family, church family and friends all helped with fund raising. We had coffee mornings, Safari suppers and concerts and very generous donations from people hearing of our project, which was called "Bandages for Bangladesh". I approached medical dressing companies for samples, and they were very sympathetic to my pleas. I also started to put together training sessions for the nurses.

Eventually I was prepared to start this exciting adventure, I felt fully supported by our church family, Holy Trinity church in St Austell, I had an army of people behind me praying and my supportive husband cheering me on. Arriving at Dhaka airport in January 1994 was quite an

experience, there were thousands of people all behind fences watching people arriving by plane and there were armed guards on duty everywhere. I was picked up by an ambulance and the journey to the hospital was an experience I shall never forget as the traffic had to be seen to be believed. We had 17 miles to travel to the hospital, but this took us over 3 hours due to holdups and the unbelievable amount of traffic on the roads. Needless to say, I felt totally exhausted and overwhelmed on arrival at the hospital.

The headquarters of the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), situated in Chaplain, Savar, occupies approximately 11 acres of land. It was in 1990 that CRP relocated to Savar from rented premises in Farmgate., Dhaka. CRP originally began its operation in 1979 using two cement storerooms in the grounds of the Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital, Dhaka. The size and complexity of the current CRP-Savar centre, the 13 sub-centres across Bangladesh and the extensive range of services now provided to people with disabilities throughout Bangladesh exemplify the progress made by CRP during the last 39 years.

There is also a unique type of rehabilitation training facility known as the half-way hostel, where patients prepare themselves for returning to their community. There is a large accessible garden where Spinal injury patients learn gardening skills from a wheelchair. CRP-aware shop is an outlet for the sale of handicrafts made by CRP's patients.

It is difficult to capture all that happened in my initial 4 months there, it was full on from the start. I organised training sessions with the nurses working alongside them in dressing the pressure areas. This was back breaking work taking 6 of us all morning to complete the dressings, there were no electric variable height beds, so it was just going with the flow ! The discharge and smell from the pressure ulcers made the strongest stomachs turn over, and there were flies over some sheets due to the discharge from the dressings, so I purchased mosquito nets to address this.

I was received by all the staff with friendship and kindness. People say how amazing to go out and give help and advice within the hospital, but I got back so much more in friendship, working alongside people, and learning about another culture. It was incredible - the staff were mainly Muslim, however there were Buddhists, Hindus and Christians all working side by side in the hospital. The hospital's **Mission statement** is "Service to Sufferers is service to God ". **Their vision** is "To ensure the inclusion of girls and boys, women and men with disabilities into mainstream society" and their **core values** are Sensitivity, Compassion, Dignity & Respect, Collaboration and Commitment to excellence. A lot to attain but all very positive and it has been a real privilege to work alongside them to encourage and train them in these aspirations.

The infection prevention and control aspect of the hospital needed a lot of work to bring working practice up to acceptable standards. All staff were given hand hygiene training and we installed, through our fund-raising, hand washing basins, liquid soap and paper towels in each ward and departments. We also provided 100 mattresses which were made in Bangladesh.

I also looked at the governance structure within the hospital which needed a lot of work. We ran sessions on the importance of team working, cultivating a fair just culture rather than a blame culture. On the ward we looked at data such as how many falls were recorded and ways to reduce them, how many patients were being admitted to the hospital with grade 3 /4

pressure ulcers and where they were admitted from. The patients coming into the hospital with pressure ulcers were very worrying – one was admitted with 16 pressure ulcers 4 of which were grade 4 involving exposed bone. This was of great concern, so I organised a “STOP THE PRESSURE CONFERENCE “, which 120 nurses from all over Bangladesh attended . Most nurses said that they were going back to their workplace with new knowledge which they were going to put into everyday practice . To me this really justified all the hard work involved in organising this day

I also looked at the infection rate regarding surgical infections, which was a big worry especially after visiting the operating theatre. The general environment of the operating theatre was dirty and dusty, windows were ill-fitting letting in dust, there was mould on the walls, broken tiles on the floor, and the equipment was out of date or not working. In some cases, patients had died on the operating table due to lack of facilities. The great worry was the lack of suitable equipment within the operating theatre, so back we came to start fund raising to refurbish it to a standard required for spinal surgery. All this wasn't done in my initial visit of 4 months, but after my initial visit I visited every year for 1 month over a period of 26 years.

On arriving home we started to raise funds and plan what equipment was needed but we quickly realised that this amount of money was out of our reach with our fund raising. My husband is a Rotarian, and his club (St Austell Bay) decided to support us in this project. This was an answer to prayer. Other Rotary groups were approached who had had experience of applying for an international grant and after many meetings, discussion, looking at equipment, filling in and refilling in the forms we eventually got the decision – **yes, you've got the grant!!!** We also applied for a NATO grant and were granted the money to cover the hospital operating theatre with suitable flooring. We went to NATO in Brussels to pick up our cheque, which was an amazing experience. So, it was eventually decided to purchase a state of the arts operating anaesthetic machine including a ventilator, an operating table including spinal and orthopaedic attachments, an operating light with special lights needed for spinal surgery, patient monitors new suction machines and an autoclave. This was overwhelming achievement for all involved in this project – the CRP operating staff, St Austell Bay Rotary club, Gulshan Rotary club based in Bangladesh who partnered this project and Roger and myself. It was decided to rename the operating theatre “The Zoe Varney Suite” in memory of our precious daughter.

Going to Bangladesh was a life changing situation in many ways: going to a country with such diverse culture , meeting such amazing people from all walks of life – patients and staff included . We give God the Praise and Glory for making this possible, He was with us every step of the way. We thank our family and our church family – Holy Trinity St Austell, all our friends who has helped us fund raise, St Austell Bay Rotary club and Gulshan Rotary club. An amazing Bangladeshi adventure.

Jan Varney



Centre for the Rehabilitation for the Paralyzed in Savar



Patient on a Stricker Frame- high Spinal Injury

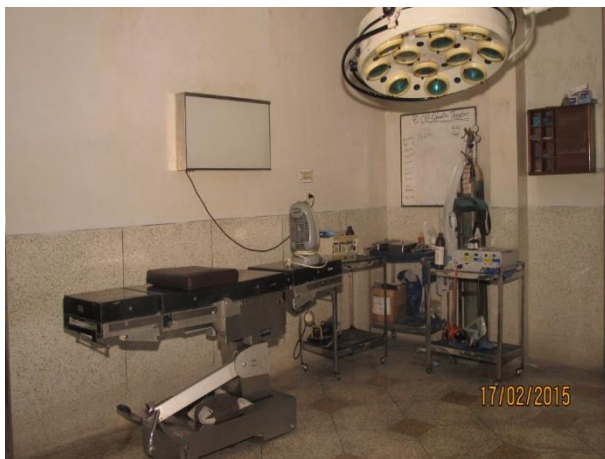


Donating 100 matressees through fund raising

Beautiful Bangladesh

Ayesha, A Scarf Injury Victim

Ayesha, 10 years old girl, a victim of scarf injury. Her scarf was entangled into the motor of an auto-rickshaw. She was treated at CRP for 4 months



The operating theatre before and after refurbishment