

Hope for a Little Bit of Change Tomorrow

By **Lai Ning-Sheng**, Superintendent of Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital



In March 2019, Cyclone Idai ravaged Africa, causing catastrophic floods in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique in Eastern Africa. Tzu Chi volunteers in Africa crossed national borders to assess the damage, and subsequently distributed various relief goods and medical supplies received from around the world. The superintendents of and many doctors from Hualien, Taipei, Taichung, and Dalin Tzu Chi Hospitals under the Tzu Chi Medical Foundation joined the outreach team and held free clinics in Eastern Africa in May. A total of four-day free clinic served nearly 5,000 patients. The deprivation of medical supplies in the region shocked the team. This is Tzu Chi's first outreach in Africa, starting from Mozambique. Although the stress was great, the so was the significance.

It has been only 24 years since Mozambique declared independence. It has a land mass 22 times of Taiwan,



but less than 3,000 doctors, showing a serious scarcity of healthcare resources. The WHO just had cholera under control shortly after we arrived. Because the water sources was contaminated, the locals had a hard time bathing and brushing teeth. According to the statistics provided by local health administration, 20% of the total population are living with HIV. The local medical students informed us that 90% of the patients who visited hospitals are infected with HIV. Furthermore, malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis are prevalent in the country. How to enter a country with all these challenges was a brand new experience for Tzu Chi.

This is the most shocking experience ever since I started practicing medicine after I graduated from medical school a little more than 40 years ago. On the first day of the free clinic, I diagnosed my first cholera patient in my medical career. A young girl walked into my clinic and laid feebly on the table. Local medical students advised my to do a cholera test, which came back positive. Just that morning along I treated 7 cholera patients. Most doctors in Taiwan would probably never encounter a cholera patient in their lifetime. I had quite a shock on the very first day.

The second shock I encountered



Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital Supt. Lai Ning-Sheng writes down four shocks he experienced during his outreach in Mozambique, with the self-expectation of contributing towards improving healthcare in Africa.

was how deprived the community was of healthcare resources. Many people had never seen a doctor, ever. Although there was a man well-dressed, which means they were better off compared to others, but his high blood pressure had not been monitored for 17 years, and he only took high blood pressure meds for two weeks before he stopped. People here not only lacked healthcare resources, they lack knowledge on health as well.

The third shock was an appalling local custom that people could cure their diseases by transmitting to others. If I have AIDS, for example, I would have to transmit it to others for my AIDS to disappear. With such a high percentage of people with HIV, the cost for treatment is too high. There were no basic health education program available. That is why health education is important. With proper health education, a tremendous amount of healthcare resources could be saved, solving one of the key problems.

The fourth shock was the severe shortage of doctors. A great portion of the population had never seen a doctor. According to the medical students at the free clinic who assisted with translation, the shortage had always been there. They pointed out that doctors were underpaid in the country, around 80% of them would rather work in pharmaceutical companies than practicing medicine. That is precisely why Mozambique need an overhaul of its

healthcare system. Hopefully one day the change will come.

What we witnessed on the ground was a primitive healthcare condition. The treatment of every patient was far from ideal. I once asked these medical students what they should do knowing that the healthcare issue was critical. “What can we do? We can only hope for a little bit of change with each tomorrow,” they answered in despair.

In Taiwan, whenever we have needs, the ambulance is only a phone call away. Over there, all they have are bicycles, pedaling against time. During the free clinic, a child fell from a coconut tree, suffering from what appeared to be bone fracturing and severe hemorrhaging. Ambulance was called, but half an hour later, it remained nowhere in sight. We had to stand by and watch the child fell into coma. It wasn't until a local volunteer drove the boy to a hospital nearly two hours away was the boy's life saved.

For the longest time, people of Mozambique lived in deprivation and despair, watching nature taking its course. It was a distressing and depressing African phenomenon. Schweitzer worked as a medical missionary in Africa. We had the chance of encountering his spiritual mentor during our trip there - the helpless victims in suffering. To make a difference in their lives, to pass on love and empathy, will be our aim in terms of healthcare.

