

Irish Consultants' Work in Vietnam and Tanzania

Over the last 18 years, about 30 Irish doctors – the majority Consultants - and 10 Irish nurses have donated their time and expertise to provide highly complex medical procedures for hundreds of children in Vietnam and Tanzania. MAUREEN BROWNE speaks to Prof. Martin Corbally, founding member and Programme Director of Operation Childlife.

Prof. Corbally says the charity had treated approximately 1,000 children in both countries since they began working in Vietnam 18 years ago and in Tanzania 15 years ago.

This autumn, they are planning to begin working in Mongolia and Jordan, where they will partner with the Jordanian Red Crescent. The Charity is always open to explore other areas of operation and to engage or partner with like-minded NGOs.

"We have an agreement with the Institute of Global Surgery at RCSI and may look to teach/train/operate in other African countries e.g. Malawi, but we are open to anywhere there is need, if we are invited. The way it works is we get a request to engage, we send an assessment team, we look at what is feasible and ethical, get Board approval, invite the appropriate volunteers, secure funding, sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and then the work can begin. It's a necessary process to ensure that all the necessary parts of the jigsaw are in place to ensure success of any engagement. We are particularly focused to ensure that there is an effective transfer of skills to the local teams and that our work reflects local needs.

"Most of the volunteers commit to an annual or biannual clinical visit. They give one to two weeks of their time each year or twice a year and many have done this for more than 17 years (for many this is part of their annual leave). As well

as those who come from Ireland, we also have volunteers from Italy, the U.K. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. On occasions, there is need of a very specialised skill and this may be a once-off specialist visit. OCL pays for air tickets, pick up at airport and hotel accommodation. All our volunteers pay for meals while they are in the field.

"We are always looking for more volunteers in areas related to the care of the child – Nurses (OT, ICU), Surgeons (all specialties), Anaesthetists, Paediatricians."

Prof. Corbally, who is Professor and Head of Surgery at RCSI Bahrain, Chief of Staff and Consultant Paediatric Surgeon at King Hamad University Hospital Bahrain, said he started the programme "with huge help from a lot of visionary, dedicated and like-minded people," to give something back. "We are all a small part of Operation Childlife but we are each integral to a necessary process of knowledge transfer to low and middle income countries.

"We began OCL in 2004, with a visit to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon, Vietnam to Children's Hospital #2. This is one of three (then two) major paediatric hospitals in HCMC with over 6,000 OPD visits each day, 1,500 beds and more than 2,000 inpatients each day. At that time, we were probably among the first foreign medical teams since the Americans left.

We went to Vietnam at the invitation of Christina Noble who had recognized an unmet need for specialist surgical services amongst the children and families



Prof. Martin Corbally

she helped. That relationship with the Christina Noble Children's Foundation (CNCF) has flourished and matured ever since. Christina's tireless work for poor children and families of Vietnam has now been taken over by her daughter Helenita. CNCF is the major sponsor for the work OCL does in Vietnam.

OCL was recognized by the CNCF for its work in Vietnam in 2019 and awarded an Outstanding Champion of Children Award.

OCL became a formal registered charity in Ireland in 2008.

"We began our work in Tanzania around 2007, at the invitation of Dr



Trish Scanlon, who is an Irish Paediatric Oncologist at Muhimbili National Hospital, Dar es Salaam.

"The doctors, who volunteer, are mostly consultants but we have also taken doctors in training and continue to do so. The nurses are all expert in their area e.g. theatre, continence. OCL has recently offered a training – travelling scholarship for Nurse-Doctor trainees to accompany clinical team visits. Commencing this year, there will be an annual award (travelling scholarship) administered through RCSI and it will be offered for the next five years. Our purpose in this is to promote global health and altruism. The RCSI has been a major help from the beginning, especially former CEO Michael Horgan and current CEO, Prof Cathal Kelly. This travel award further cements that valuable relationship. Our purpose in this is to promote awareness of global health issues and to encourage medical altruism in doctors' and nurses' training, from an early stage. We have also been able to

bring medical and nursing students from RCSI-Bahrain to Vietnam and Tanzania to promote the same altruistic awareness and to promote inter-professionalism. This had been very successful to date and rewarding to students."

They hope to recruit more volunteers and trainees in all areas from Ireland and internationally and are pleased that they have recently added six surgeons, one anaesthetist and several trainees to their ranks.

Operation Childlife has adopted a new program (PASS) as its official teaching platform. Developed by paediatric surgeons it equips those involved in childcare, with the skills and knowledge to recognize and treat the acutely ill child. OCL intends to align this course with its clinical visits to Tanzania, Mongolia and Jordan and is currently accrediting specific faculty.

Prof. Corbally said they hoped this would serve as the basis for further onsite formal training and that this will be a

SOME IRISH DOCTORS AND NURSES WHO HAVE VOLUNTEERED WITH OCI:

- ▶ **CARDIAC OPEN HEART AND CARDIOLOGY**
 - Prof Mark Redmond
 - Dr Paul Ozliskok
 - Nurse Maria Moyles
 - Dr Brendan O Hare
 - Dr Billy Casey
 - Dr Ramesh Cutti
 - Ms. Annette McCarthy
 - Mark Tormley
- ▶ **UROLOGY**
 - Prof Feargal Quinn
 - Dr Padraig Sheeran
 - Prof Fabio Bartoli.
- ▶ **NEUROSURGERY**
 - Dr Talal Al Mayman
- ▶ **INTERVENTIONAL RADIOLOGY**
 - Prof Mark Ryan
- ▶ **RADIOLOGY**
 - Dr Claire Brenner
- ▶ **ANESTHESIA**
 - Dr Brendan O Hare
 - Dr Bill Casey
 - Prof Eamon Tierney
 - Dr Keith Johnston
 - Dr Dhafir Al Khudari
 - Dr David Mannion
 - Dr Padraig Sheeran
 - Dr Terence Montague
- ▶ **NURSING**
 - Roisin Cleary
 - Anne Fitzpatrick
 - Maria Moyles
 - Olive Delaney
 - Francis Halligan
 - Jeanette Neary
 - Sheila Hayes
 - Siobhan Fitzgerald
 - Sandra Roche
 - Yvonne Friel
- ▶ **PERFUSIONIST AND MED EQUIP BACK UP**
 - Annette McCarthy
 - Mark Tormley
- ▶ **PLASTIC AND RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY**
 - Dr Abdulla Fakhro
 - Dr Patricia Eadie
- ▶ **AIRWAY RECONSTRUCTION**
 - Mr John Russell
- ▶ **ORTHOPAEDIC**
 - Ms Paula Kelly
 - Mr Pat Kiely
- ▶ **INFECTIOUS DISEASE**
 - Dr Karina Butler
- ▶ **SURGICAL ONCOLOGY (THORACIC- ANORECTAL - OESOPHAGEAL RECONSTRUCTION)**
 - Prof Martin Corbally
- ▶ **GENERAL PAEDIATRIC SURGERY**
 - Prof Alan Mortell
 - Dr Terence Montague
 - Nurse Yvonne Friel
- ▶ **PAEDIATRICS**
 - Prof Alan Finan (newly joined)
- ▶ **PAEDIATRIC ICU**
 - Dr Aisling Walsh (Newly joined)

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formal part of each clinical site visit.

As part of its training mission, OCL also brings overseas doctors to Ireland for training. “We have, over the years, brought around 30 doctors, surgeons, nurses, perfusionists, for periods of three to six months, to train in cardiology, cardiac surgery, and paediatric surgery.

“More than 100 doctors from Vietnam and Tanzania have received specialty training in Surgery (Cardiac, General, Thoracic, Upper GI, Urology, Orthopaedics, Solid Tumour, Airway Reconstruction, Plastic Lower GI), Anaesthesia, Cardiology, Radiology and Interventional Radiology. More recently trainees in Neurosurgery and Radiotherapy have been welcomed to King Hamad University Hospital from Vietnam. A vital part of Operation Childlife’s mission is that patients’ preparation for any intervention is complete with discussion at Tumour Board and multidisciplinary meetings. This focus on teamwork underpins the ethos of OCL.”

Operation Childlife spends around €15-€25,000 a year and has spent about €250,000 - €300,000 since its establishment. The charity is now expanding the range of its work and the countries it works in and greater financial support will be needed. It is actively starting a more organized fund raising process and hope that the public will contribute. “Broadly, funding has come from an Irish Aid Grant (2007-2010), which helped set up the Cardiac Programme in Vietnam, the Christina Noble Children’s Foundation and kind and wonderful private donors who share our vision of giving back and helping every child have a normal life “

Its finances are audited annually. It has recently appointed Danielle Hannon as Operations Executive on a part-time basis, a vital addition to the OCL team, “OCL has also received a seed grant from ESTHER Ireland to assist with the initial evaluation of new programmes.”

Operation Childlife is run by a 10-member Board, chaired by John Collins. The Board Members are (John Collins, Cormac Kilty, Jean Hughes, Naji AlAmuddin, Eamon Tierney, Mark Ryan, Brendan O Hare, Sameer Ootom and Martin Corbally. The Board develops vision, oversees all planned trips and ensures the charity is regulator compliant.

Board Member, Dr Jean Hughes presented a paper on “Sustainable Development Goals,” at the September meeting of the United Nations.

MANY OF THE PROCEDURES CARRIED OUT BY OCL ARE AT TERTIARY AND QUATERNARY LEVELS

The more complex procedures carried out are the Open Heart Switch procedure, Extended Hepatectomy and Oesophageal Replacement.

The main procedures carried out are:

- ▶ Cardiac - Open Heart surgery, Diagnostic and complex cardiac catheterization procedures.
- ▶ Interventional Radiology in a variety of complex areas.
- ▶ Oncology Surgery - Liver Tumours, Kidney Tumours, Sacrococcygeal Teratomas, Ovarian Germ Cell Tumours, Neuroblastoma, Pancreatic Tumours, Thoracic Tumours.
- ▶ Urology – Complex Bladder and Urinary Tract Abnormalities like Cloacal Deformities.
- ▶ Orthopaedic - Club Foot.
- ▶ Plastic Surgery - Hand reconstruction, severe Burn Injuries.
- ▶ Oesophageal replacement for failed TOF repair or ingested caustic with loss of oesophagus.

Prof Corbally said that the OCL team have successfully been able to transfer many complex skills to local staff, that allow for the development of local capacity e.g. in Vietnam they now run two pump cardiac cases each day, supported by an outstanding cardiac team and ICU team (mortality in HO Chi Minh City alone before the program was 500 children per year, primarily due to a lack of access to complex cardiac surgery). The local specialist teams now also do all major complex tumour surgery including extended hepatectomy with excellent results.

“In Tanzania local medical staff now do complex paediatric surgery, Radical Nephrectomy, Club Foot management and complex urology. Previously these cases waited for visiting surgeons or rarely transfer abroad.

“We brought Neurosurgery to City Children’s Hospital, District 7, HCMC, Vietnam, three years ago and are assisting with their training in Radiotherapy. We are adding Paediatric Intensive Care, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery and Paediatric Cardiac Surgery to the services we provide in Tanzania we will continue to provide hepatobiliary surgery progressively and thoracic surgery. We are really excited about beginning a new chapter in Jordan and Mongolia and anticipate a successful experience there too.”

Prof Corbally ends by saying “For our many volunteers and for the local teams in Saigon and Dar es Salaam, where we have operated for so many years, being part of Operation Childlife is much more than being part of a medical charity. It has become an extended National and Multinational family, multicultural in nature, altruistic by design, where like-minded people forge lasting friendships based on a commitment to improve the lives of children now and into the future. Many of our team members have often stated that the interaction with their friends and colleagues in Vietnam and Tanzania have been some of the most rewarding and enjoyable professional collaborations of their career. We are all in awe of what they achieve each day and what is possible when there is a will to give.”