

Pictures beyond the postcard

Felicity Waters explains how Swansea University Medical School is taking practical steps to help students to understand global health issues

WORKING IN the Democratic Republic of Congo is not your average placement for a medical student from Swansea.

But when foreign language graduate Henry Burnand decided to take up medicine, he had already spent two years as an aid worker in Sudan and Liberia and wanted to practise medicine abroad.

Mr Burnand — now a Cardiff third year, since Swansea University School of Medicine students eventually join the Cardiff medical course for clinical training — spent this summer in Kinshasa's general hospital doing a mini-elective while the country held its first free elections since 1965. Staying with a correspondent for the Reuters news agency in the Democratic Republic of Congo, he also witnessed much of the fighting that followed the results.

'Being aware of difficulties that doctors and medical students face abroad is important,' he says. 'Medicine is a global thing we all have in common and all students share the same anxieties, but they have to take on far greater responsibilities than us in their hospitals.'

Mr Burnand is not the only Swansea student to branch out from UK medical training. Other students have recently:

- Visited Belarus to help children with disabilities
- Developed links with the University of the Gambia School of Medicine
- Become involved with University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria.

The graduate-entry programme in Swansea, established in 2004, places great emphasis on the importance of international health and encourages its students to develop active partnerships in other countries.

It is exactly the type of approach advocated

by the BMA medical students committee. At its conference, in spring this year, medical students called for global and international health issues to be a core part of medical school curricula. They argued that learning about global health was 'essential in fostering a generation of health professionals equipped to deal with international medical issues'. The BMA Welsh MSC is due to discuss the issue at its meeting next month.

Swansea senior lecturer in paediatrics Steve Allen has extensive experience of working in West Africa and is a trustee of charity TESITO, which aims tackle poverty and ill health in the Gambia.

But he says he is not interested in showing students his holiday snaps. He wants them to experience international healthcare for themselves.

'Being a doctor is not just thinking about the needs of the health service in this country but the needs of the global health service,' he says.

'We want students to have a real experience of international health, we think that's essential. Students need to understand the burden of disease on the rest of the world and have a wider perspective than just South Wales or the UK NHS.'

Students travel overseas under their own steam, but one week of the timetable during the second year is dedicated to international health and involves case studies presented by the students who have been abroad.

'Wider thinking is needed because in terms of globalisation, health is a serious issue,' says Dr Allen. 'Many interventions have not been successful and there is a need for fresh thinking; we hope that our students will be able to influence the debate further down the line.'



A HEALTHY EXCHANGE: visiting the Democratic Republic of Congo (main picture) helped Henry Burnand (inset) to gain a greater awareness of the problems facing doctors and medical students in the developing world



This month a group of students will travel to the Gambia as part of a ground-breaking African exchange programme. Eight students who hosted fourth year Gambian students earlier this year will make a reciprocal visit to see how medicine is taught in a developing country.

There are fewer than 100 medical students at the University of the Gambia School of Medicine and specialist doctors are scarce. Students often have to rely on guest lecturers from abroad to complete their training.

Swansea second year Laura Bennett says she is excited about meeting her counterparts again: 'Our aim now is to establish the link a bit more and to meet other medical students. We're also hoping to set up website link with Gambian students, which will have case studies on it so all can access them.'

Swansea medical school is also working

closely with the Tropical Health & Education Trust, which facilitates links globally between hospitals and training institutions in developing countries and their UK counterparts. Establishing links, the trust says, benefits both parties and helps counter the drain of professionals from developing countries by providing training and support.

The trust says at least a quarter of NHS and medical training institutions could be involved in such a partnership by 2011.

Swansea medical school is hoping to be a part of a four-part link between themselves, Swansea NHS Trust, the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital in the Gambian capital, Banjul, and the University of the Gambia School of Medicine.

Swansea already has strong links with Nigeria and now has an official memorandum of understanding with University

College Hospital, Ibadan, to share teaching and learning. The partnership has developed computer-based learning resources so students can share information. Topics include the global burden of disease and specific conditions such as TB, malaria, HIV, obesity and parasitology.

Seven first year medical students from Swansea have also forged links with eastern Europe following a trip to Belarus as part of a project with charity Belarussian Aid for Children Cardiff Undergraduate Programme.

The Swansea students took eight youngsters with disabilities, two carers and an interpreter to a sanatorium in the south of Belarus for a health break.

Second year Niki Lynam says: 'The children had disabilities like cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome and microcephaly and had never been on holiday before.'

'In Belarus people are not used to seeing disabled children because they've always been hidden away. Conditions used to be ignored, with children left in cots in orphanages with not enough space or staff.'

'We were warned they may be spat at by local people, but it was really humbling to see that people were crying when they saw us and apologising that people from outside had to come to care for their own children.'

International health is a growing concern with more universities encouraging awareness of global poverty and its effects on health.

President of the Swansea branch of student campaigning network MEDSIN, Matt Pugh, believes learning about international health issues makes for better and more rounded doctors: 'If you are a doctor, your commitment to health should not be bound by political borders.'

'I believe that as doctors we should advocate for people's health globally, and from a moral perspective we should speak out on behalf of those who can't.'

● Don't forget to fill in the BMA survey on improving global health on page 6

