

Ruth Coggan reflects on her return to Pakistan

Earthquake ZONE

After nearly 30 years as a gynaecologist in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, I decided to retire in 1999, a year earlier than originally intended. My sick sister and elderly parents needed care. I thought there would be no question of returning to work so I abandoned everything medical: I gave away my stethoscope, textbooks and white coats, and cancelled my journal subscriptions.

Call to return

On 8 October 2005 a massive earthquake hit Kashmir. The epicentre was less than 50 miles from Bach Hospital where I had worked for the last seven years of my career. At first it didn't occur to me to do anything except donate money and pray.

Then, three days later, three Swedish former colleagues called me as they passed through London on their way to 'help out at Bach'. They gave me a jolt. I continued to pray and chatted with friends, and felt that I should get in touch with Bach's medical superintendent. Secretly, I hoped he wouldn't have need of me. But in the 24 hours it took for him to reply, the Lord changed my heart and I found myself really wanting to go. So I was delighted to respond to his warm, enthusiastic invitation to come and assist.

The Lord calls us to do only those things which he is prepared to equip us to do. Over the next 24 hours I cleared my diary for three months – and discovered how easily dispensable I was – and flew out.

Earthquake wake

Instead of chaos, I found the hospital, whose inpatient numbers had trebled in just a few days, working in a calm and orderly fashion. Just two weeks earlier, the hospital authorities had drawn up a major emergency plan, in anticipation of a bomb or gun attack such as several Christian institutions had seen in recent years. Then the earthquake had happened and the newly-formed emergency plan had been immediately put into good effect. All the staff were working twelve hour shifts and all off duty had been cancelled.

The extra patients and their relatives were accommodated in two enormous tents outside the hospital buildings. Local mosque volunteers were coming in three times a day to supply them with food and drink. Too terrified by the earthquake to sleep indoors, staff families were living in makeshift tents in the hospital grounds, alongside a couple of NGO (non-government organisation) base camps. Aftershocks, many of them frighteningly strong, were occurring frequently and helicopters were constantly flying overhead, delivering relief to cut-off villages. On top of all this, large numbers of visitors passing through the hospital were being fed and accommodated as required.

Fitting back in

The gynaecologist who had succeeded me at Bach was on home leave. So, duly kitted out with a borrowed purple stethoscope and clad in an enormous white coat with 'cardiac surgeon' embroidered

on the pocket, I fell back into my old job. I was very aware of my limitations as medicine had moved on in the six years since I had last thought about it. I felt particularly out of my depth trying to prescribe for medical conditions but the regular staff were all extremely supportive. I was surprised, delighted and very thankful that my linguistic, obstetric and surgical skills returned so easily. Taking over some of the obs and gynae oncalls, I was able to release the overworked general surgeons to a certain degree, enabling them to attend to the injured and even get a little much needed time off.

Valued presence

From the outset the medical superintendent of the hospital made it plain that, even if I didn't see a single patient, my presence was valued. There can't be many superintendents in the world like that! It made me realise that my contribution was more than just being

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another pair of hands. Knowing the languages and having experience of the culture meant that I could listen sympathetically to patients and their relatives. I held their hands, wept and prayed with them. I was able to visit what was left of their homes and held a clinic in an area that could only be reached by helicopter.

Trauma

It was not only the patients who were traumatised. The staff had been working long hours, dealing with horrific trauma and listening to stories of suffering and loss; they too needed to come to terms with the situation and have their stories heard. So another of my roles was to go for walks with them, listen to and pray with them. After a while, we began to celebrate birthdays again. And when it came, we celebrated Christmas in style.

Back to normal?

After three months my time was up. As I left, the hospital's workload was almost back to normal. But outside the grounds things were still far from normal. The homeless were waiting for the snow to melt before starting to rebuild, fearing what would happen to their weakened hillside houses in the monsoon rains. The threat of further quakes was still ever present.

There is so much more work to be done in earthquake-ravaged Kashmir (see the overseas opportunities page) but I am so grateful to God for my small part in the relief effort.

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