

crossing cultures : India

Werner McIlwaine describes his service in India



Werner McIlwaine
is a retired physician
in Northern Ireland

You'll have to go back up and try again,' I said to Karin, my wife of nine weeks. It was three am and very dark. We were in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, and we had just arrived at the guest house from the temporary airport then in use. There had been no reply to Karin's knock at the flat on the fifth floor of the (only partly constructed) building. We had been glad to see our two suitcases, which were to last us for one-and-a-half years at a Mission Hospital in Miraj, Maharashtra State, India. That was in November 1979, and I had taken unpaid leave of absence as a senior registrar for this. Thankfully, louder knocking by my intrepid wife had awakened the inmates and we were able to get change, pay the patient taxi driver and have our first night in India.

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I did not return to India until 2009, when I was a member of a Tearfund Transform Team, going to visit Duncan Hospital in Bihar State in North India. From the overnight train, we were taken in a hospital jeep to rural India to see community projects supported by Tearfund. I thought to myself, 'When I retire in 2011, I must visit this hospital again.' So, in November 2011, I was back and looking at tetanus, scrub typhus, leptospirosis and cysticercosis, alongside more familiar stroke and acute myocardial infarction patients.

That was the first of several annual visits, to which I added two weeks with a joint medical and dental team, visiting Delhi Bible Institute and its centres across North India. We did check-ups with simple pharmacy and dental work; then onto Duncan hospital, and for the last time in February 2020, to Herbertpur Hospital for a brief visit.



Retirement gave opportunity to join Tearfund as a volunteer speaker. I also joined the Northern Ireland CMF committee, meeting some great folk and some very enthusiastic Christian medical students. With church assembly elder duties, doing taxi service for four grandchildren and spending time as the under-gardener to my wife the 'Squiness' (yes, it's a scrabble word my son-in-law Richard discovered recently), you might ask, 'Do you miss consultant physician work?' Yes, I did – for one hour on a Monday afternoon in August 2011.

So, there are opportunities for service on the mission field during student electives, and you could consider taking leave and going to a Mission Hospital during your postgraduate training. I was able to get some of my time in India recognised for speciality training. If you get the opportunity to go on a Tearfund or other mission team visit, do take it.

Someone has said, 'There is no unemployment with God,' and it's absolutely true. But the best is always yet to come.... ▀