

Tuesday 14th February 2017, my husband Charlie and I step off South African Airways and onto the tarmac of Lilongwe International Airport. Our excitement amplified by the birds-eye view we had experienced flying over Malawi. Two months before this we had no idea our lives would take such a drastic turn of events. We were settled in comfortable jobs, Charlie as an Exercise Physiologist (AEP) working across three practices and myself as the manager of the Illawarra regional re-settlement program for refugees in NSW, Australia. We had not comprehended that in a mere 8 weeks we would be managing the only prosthetics and orthotics service in the Northern Region of Malawi founded and run by not-for-profit 500 miles.



Charlie first came across 500 miles in ESSA Activate, his professional AEP magazine. A fellow AEP, Beth Sheehan, had written an article about her experiences managing the 500 miles prosthetics and orthotics centre in Lilongwe. Charlie and I had made the decision the previous week to begin investigating pathways into a low-resource country where our skills would be of benefit. Beth's article had come at the opportune moment, so we reached out to her in hope of a reply.

Within the week Beth had responded telling us about her experiences in Malawi and how she was able to transfer her skills as an AEP into a different health setting, prosthetics and orthotics. Our conversation with Beth motivated us to extend our search to include health services. We realised that we were now faced with the hard task of making connections and applying for positions...or so we thought.

Within the fortnight Beth had contacted us and asked if we were interested in talking to the founder of 500 miles, Olivia Giles, for a potential volunteer position. Ecstatic for even the opportunity we began to research 500 miles and Olivia's work within Malawi and Zambia. From our research and throughout our interview it became very clear that 500 miles' strategic direction was to achieve in-country sustainability for P&O services. It was refreshing to speak with Olivia and to hear how she had partnered 500 miles with the Ministry of Health and had a strategic plan to eventually hand over core responsibilities to the Malawian government. We did not have to think twice when she offered us the position to co-manage the centre in Mzuzu.

Within two months Charlie and I quit our jobs, gave away all our worldly possessions, got married and found ourselves landing at Lilongwe International Airport. We did not know it then but we would find new purpose and drive in our lives, along with the wonderful realisation that we could indeed live and work together.

The first few months were exciting, exhilarating and sometimes perplexing. Our previous travels throughout Africa made the cultural adjustment easier, however we faced challenges working within a low-resourced hospital setting and a population struggling to make ends meet. Even if individuals' could afford the transport costs to travel to the central hospital, they would be met with an

underfunded government health system. We observed that without 500 miles, P&O services would not exist in the Northern Region of Malawi and many of the other health services persevered on the back of passionate hospital staff.

As we settled into the position, we began to understand how 500 miles was creating in-country sustainability and meeting their mission statement; **all who need and can use a prosthetic or orthotic device to improve their quality of life will have that chance.** This is achieved through a comprehensive sensitisation/outreach programme, strong relationships with partner organisations and a memorandum of understanding with the Malawian Ministry of Health.

One of the most satisfying and enriching experiences at 500 miles is attending our sensitisation and outreach programme. Prosthetics and orthotic services is not a commonly known health service in Malawi, therefore 500 miles is systematically travelling across the Northern region of Malawi investing in community education and on-site clinical assessments.

Our volunteer, Master Mabaso, does a wonderful job explaining the benefits prosthetic and orthotic devices provide to those living with various disabilities. When he passes around a prosthetic limb or



puts on a video of a 500 miles client learning to walk on a prosthesis, people begin to cheer in amazement.

Our outreach clinics provide individuals with the opportunity to be assessed in their villages. Many of

the individuals we encounter on our outreach clinics have been left undiagnosed and unassisted due to a lack of awareness and/or the service not being provided in the Northern Region pre-2012.

Without this initiative being built into one of the core responsibilities of 500 miles, we would see many individuals miss out on increasing their quality of life through suitable P&O devices.

The relationships developed overtime with partners and the Ministry of Health have been an area that we have thoroughly enjoyed continuing. Since we began in February 2017 we have continued to develop strong relationships with many of our partners and Mzuzu Central Hospital. Our recognition as a hospital department within Mzuzu Central has been further legitimised over the last two years in an array of areas that places us in a stronger position to reach our objective of becoming a sustainable and recognised government health service in Malawi.

Our dedicated team of staff and volunteers have a real passion for helping those with disabilities. They are a critical key for 500 miles to achieve our aim of enhancing the quality of life of each individual we provide our service to. Their dedication and contributions to P&O services have seen our centre assist more individuals within the last year than any previous year. From 2012 to the end

of May 2019 we now have 2142 patients that have attended 3527 appointments. This includes 659 patients and 827 devices provided in 2018 alone.

500 miles has facilitated the educational and employment pathway of each staff member. They comprise a small handful of individuals who have the skill-set to deliver P&O services to the Malawian public. Job security and the continuation of P&O service in the North was secured in April 2018 when our remaining two technicians were placed on the MoH payroll. Subsequently all Mzuzu 500 miles staff members have security in long-term government employment and government social welfare benefits such as a retirement pension.

Of course, the most rewarding part of our work is to see the progress and benefits that prosthetic and orthotics devices are giving to our clients. As readers you would have read the amazing transformative stories our clients have experienced from the service. Such transformations can range from an increase in self-esteem/confidence, acceptance and involvement in civil society, access to education and the continuation or opportunity for employment.

