

The Story of Island Hospice in Zimbabwe on the Occasion of its 30th Anniversary

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Summary

Operating in a climate permeated by pandemics, fear and serious economic uncertainty, Zimbabwe's Island Hospice, the oldest hospice in Africa, provides a vital service to some of the world's most impoverished and vulnerable communities. In this article you will learn about the hospice and the adverse conditions in which it operates, and you will meet some of the people it has helped.

Introduction

Almost one in every ten people in Zimbabwe today is an orphan. Many of them are left alone to cope with their bereavement and health problems, as well as care for siblings without any support or guidance.

2009 marks the 30th Anniversary of the Harare-based Island Hospice, a pioneer in the provision of palliative care and support to people with life-threatening illnesses, their families and caregivers. As the health care system becomes less viable in Zimbabwe, an increasing amount of people are turning to the paediatric clinics operated by Island Hospice.

No stranger to operating in extremely difficult circumstances, Island Hospice has become known for its creativity and efficiency in responding to challenges and developing programmes to address emerging needs. The organisation has recently evolved its service to provide more tailored support to child carers in response to the growing numbers of children being left to care for dying parents and siblings, and facing bereavement at a very young age.

Challenging times

Zimbabwe has one of the lowest life expectancies on Earth – 44 years for men and 43 for women – and one of the highest number of child carers. Island Hospice faces a number of acute challenges due to the col-

lapse of the health system, the far-reaching impact of the HIV pandemic and the recent cholera outbreak.

In a nation where 15% of adults, and a large number of children, are HIV positive; where a cholera outbreak has now affected over 100,000 people; and where malnutrition, infectious diseases, malaria and the breakdown of sanitation and drinking water services are causing widespread, serious health problems, the resources available to treat the sick and dying are woefully inadequate.



Orphans outside Island Hospice

The collapse of the economy and the rise of hyperinflation have made such essential medical supplies as antibiotics, antiretroviral HIV drugs and pain-relief medication practically inaccessible, and have left doctors and nurses unable to survive on their salaries.

Hospitals, left without power, water and sanitation have become completely unable to function. As a result, since October 2008, three of Zimbabwe's four main hospitals have closed down, abandoning patients to their fate.

Almost one in every ten people in Zimbabwe today is an orphan. Many of them are left alone to cope with their bereavement and health problems, as well as care for siblings without any support or guidance. With so many people sick and dying and with traditional extended family and community networks being broken and overburdened, Island Hospice's **Young Carers Training Programme** gives young people the skills and basic equipment they need to care for sick relatives and themselves. The organisation also works to locate adult relatives who, with support, can act as guardians for these vulnerable children.



An attentive audience for a talk

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the extent of the catastrophe for the Zimbabwean people, and not difficult to see that the critical services provided by Island Hospice have never been more needed. In all too many cases there is simply nowhere else for people to turn. Despite the unfavourable operating climate, the Island Hospice team continues to reach out to the most needy in the communities primarily through capacity building initiatives, direct hands-on care and psychological support programmes.

A centre of excellence in palliative care

Despite the obstacles it has faced in recent years, Island Hospice has emerged a resilient and successful Centre of Palliative Care, trusted both locally and internationally for its professionalism, reliability and financial integrity. The Hospice provides inspiration and leadership in quality hospice care both in Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries. Its commitment to providing high-quality and holistic care to the community encompasses medical treatment, pain relief and nursing assistance, training in practical skills, and emotional and social support to people coping with

terminal illness and the trauma of bereavement. The organisation believes in long-term support, getting to know the families it helps intimately, and providing a personalised service that really addresses their needs and provides solutions.

While most of its primary services are provided to people in their own homes, the organisation also supports patients in hospitals and at its regular clinics, and works closely with other groups to widen its impact and advocacy. Among its most valuable resources are the over 150 community health workers trained by Island Hospice who now assist nurses in their communities and carry out many home visits. Capacity building and training – of everyone from medical professionals to eight-year-old child carers – has been one of the central pillars of the organisation since its establishment.

As well as providing medical care, and assisting with referrals for further treatment, Island Hospice provides a broad range of support for the people it helps. This can include working with families to ensure that orphans and other vulnerable children receive adequate nutrition and remain in school, advising on the sensitive task of informing children of their HIV status, and providing all manner of long-term support and counseling (both group and individual) to help members of extended families take on the complex task of caring for children who have lost their parents to HIV, TB and other illnesses.



Children performing a play

Working against the odds

Island Hospice is today entirely reliant on overseas donors and grants to carry out its work. Whereas in the past, local fundraising contributed a significant portion of the budget, the current economic climate has rendered the search for local sources of funding pointless for the time being. The organisation's excellent reputation and proven track record of service delivery have made them one of the most trusted and respected implementing partners for international donors seeking to bring medical supplies and training to Zimbabwe's desperate communities. Examples of

Island Hospice's recent international supporters include the UK Department for International Development, Direct Relief International-USA, the STARS Foundation, and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. Along with everyone else in the country, Island Hospice was hard hit by hyperinflation, which decimated the value of funds and made everyday expenses such as fuel and medications prohibitively expensive. Operations should now benefit from the fact that the government recently made both the US dollar and South African rand legal tender in Zimbabwe, and abandoned the printing of the local currency.

Other obstacles which have affected Island Hospice's work include the recent ban on feeding programmes in keeping with the official line that there is no hunger in Zimbabwe, despite World Food Programme estimates that at least 45% of the population is malnourished. This made it difficult to include the provision of food and nutritional supplements, which have become a key element in Island Hospice's basic care. In many cases, it is the promise of a meal that encourages children to attend clinics and training sessions, where they also receive vital information, treatment and supplies.

The overall volatility of the political climate can make it difficult for some people to attend clinics, and has at times hindered the ability of Island Hospice staff to carry out their regular duties. But, remarkably, and thanks to its dedicated staff and overseas supporters, the organisation continues to provide vital services, and even launch and expand programmes, despite the staggering economic, political and healthcare deterioration facing Zimbabwe. One challenge that is ever-present is finding the resources needed for Island Hospice to care for the increasing numbers of people, especially children, in need.



Children from Mufakose display their certificates

Looking to the future

Island Hospice is optimistic that change will come to Zimbabwe and the country will begin to recover and rebuild – but this will take time, and the people currently living in illness, isolation and loss need assistance. The next few years will present many more opportunities for Island Hospice to continue to creatively develop programmes to address the growing

and evolving needs of the communities it serves. Zimbabwe has the highest mortality rate in the world. The one thing that is certain is that there is no chance that the workload will diminish in the foreseeable future. Island Hospice's plan is to consolidate and roll out its services, diversify its sources of support, and identify new avenues for providing care, in order to bring hope to as many people as possible.

Island Hospice: Stories from the field

The Moyo family's story

When the oldest of his four children was just nine years old, Mr Moyo died of Aids, leaving his very ill wife to bring up their children alone. Soon afterwards, and shortly after being referred to Island Hospice, Mrs Moyo also died from Aids and it was discovered that her four children were all HIV-positive.

Following discussions with the children and their neighbours, Island Hospice discovered the whereabouts of an aunt who lived nearby and they initiated the complex process of encouraging her to care for her orphaned nieces and nephews. At first, their aunt was reluctant to take the children in, but a home visit and several counselling sessions from Island Hospice gave her the chance to learn more about HIV, overcome her fear of living with HIV-positive children, and gain an understanding of the importance of keeping the four orphaned siblings together. She agreed to care for the children in her home, and, despite the many challenges the family has since faced, the aunt has continued to attend counselling sessions on child development, the trauma of losing both parents and the challenge of nurturing bereaved children. Island Hospice is now setting up a guardian support group in the area, which she is planning to join.

Today the four children are all doing well, and living together in a caring family environment. Without the involvement of Island Hospice, the scenario could have been very different. The aunt would probably not have received the information and support she needed to welcome the children into her home, the siblings would have probably been separated and, without adequate care, their health and emotional well-being would have rapidly deteriorated. Because Island Hospice recognises the enormous demands placed on the adults who step in as guardians to care for Zimbabwe's overwhelming numbers of orphans, the organisation recognises that the key to creating stability for vulnerable children is to address the psychological and emotional needs of these guardians.

Patience's story, aged 13 years

Patience was only four years old when she lost her mother to HIV/Aids in 2000. When her father died in 2004, she and her younger brother moved from Bulawayo to Harare in order to live with their widowed

aunt and cousins. Her aunt became concerned when Patience appeared sickly, and, when she was just ten, a test confirmed that she too was HIV-positive.

Over the following years, her aunt worried constantly about how and when to let Patience know about her HIV status. The Island Hospice social worker explored different options with her and advised on how to tell Patience of the news. Individual counselling sessions with Patience and her aunt enabled the child to be given the information in a sensitive way, as well as provide support for the entire family. Patience was upset, but relieved to know the truth – as she had already suspected her condition.

With Island Hospice's support, she is now able to consider treatment options and has joined a Children's Group that works with children affected by HIV/Aids. The Group, which is run by Island Hospice, provides children living with HIV/Aids with a chance to share their experiences and fears with others in similar situations. The children who attend these sessions can also be regularly monitored by Island Hospice staff, allowing them to keep an eye on their health, nutrition and other factors, such as whether they are attending school. Patience is fortunate to have found a supportive relative to care for her and her brother after the loss of her parents. With the help of Island Hospice, Patience does not have to face the future alone.

Tinashe's story, aged 10 years

When Tinashe's mother died in 2000 of meningitis, with suspected HIV, he went to live with his paternal grandmother in a rural village. In the meantime, his father remarried and had two further children. When it became clear that his grandmother was not able to care for Tinashe – he was becoming sickly – his father decided to bring him back to live with him and his new family. Not long afterwards, the father informed the Island Hospice social worker that he suspected that Tinashe was being mistreated and deprived of food, by his new wife. He also requested that Tinashe be tested for HIV. He was found to be positive.

When the social worker held individual sessions with Tinashe, he found him to be in extremely poor health and very emotionally withdrawn. A paediatrician confirmed that he was severely malnourished and needed to be hospitalised for observation. Island Hospice also discussed the situation with his stepmother, who explained her concerns about her own children, as well as the shortage of money and food the family faces as a result of Tinashe's father's unemployment. Following the discussions, Island Hospice developed and tailored a formal care plan for the entire family, which included monthly food packs as well Tinashe's regular attendance at an Island Hospice children's clinic.

Tinashe's story demonstrates the complexity of

problems which take root when families are affected by HIV/Aids in combination with poverty and unemployment. His story also demonstrates how vulnerable children can easily become forgotten children. Island Hospice gave Tinashe's father somewhere to turn to with his concerns about his son, and has offered Tinashe and his family a vital lifeline to see them through a very difficult period of transition. Tinashe has now been brought back to full nutrition, and his relationship with his stepmother is much improved: in fact she is the one who usually brings him to the clinic.



The staff team

Note from the Editor

Alongside traditional grants, Island Hospice is now seeking more private donations – both large and small – to help them to extend their services to more families. Island Hospice's decades of experience, dedicated staff, trusted partners, and stable infrastructure means that, regardless of the unstable situation in Zimbabwe, every dollar entrusted to them translates into real, on-the-ground support for those in desperate need. Supporting Island Hospice is a way for people around the world to show they have not forgotten the plight of Zimbabwe's most vulnerable people, without the risk of donations being misused or lost. Through Island Hospice it is possible to make a real difference regardless of the political situation.

To donate money to Island Hospice, please visit the Global Giving UK website, which features Island Hospice as one of the fundraising projects: www.globalgiving.co.uk/ac/ctry00zimbab1.html Including disabled children in picture books