

March 30, 2015

Where to begin....

As many of you know October 28, 2014 was a date that will be forever etched in my mind and in my heart. It is the day God spoke. He spoke to me in the most audible voice, saying "Why are you not going?"

The weeks that followed were filled with prayer and preparation for a 6 week assignment to Sierra Leone – yes, I was going to W Africa to work with the Ebola efforts. I had only a slight idea of what laid ahead, but I knew and trusted the One who holds the future in His hands..."All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be." Psalm 139:16. I had committed long ago to go anywhere and do whatever my Lord asked, but I have to admit this time seemed like stepping out in faith...blindfolded.

On February 1 I landed in Sierra Leone with a team of 15 other healthcare professionals... thus began the journey that for the most part I feel totally inept to tell, but will try....

First through sharing several "newsletters" that I had sent to family while I was in Sierra Leone. In an effort not to duplicate things, but to give a better sense of what my thoughts and feelings were while I was there. Hopefully they will serve to give a personal perspective of the work there.

Secondly through my thoughts now that I have been home for a few weeks. As I have tried to wrap my brain around the past several months the one consistent thought is this...I don't even know where to begin... At first glance life in Sierra Leone appears to be just like many other African countries I have worked in, that is until you take a closer look. There is a shroud that covers every person in Sierra Leone, as well as every aspect of their culture and way of life.

No touching others, you can't care for your sick family member or friend, you cannot provide a proper burial for your loved one, markets are closed and food is scarce, children cannot get immunizations, schools are closed, healthcare for minor injuries and illnesses is not available, there is no place for women to safely deliver their babies.....

In 2002 the decade long civil war ended. In 2012 the UNDP noted Sierra Leone as #9 of the 10 poorest countries in the world. In 2014 as they continued to rebuild their country, and the healthcare system, it was noted they had 2 doctors for every 100,000 persons. Then the unthinkable happened...the country's first confirmed death from Ebola on May 24, 2014. In the 10 months that have passed there have been over 11,800 suspected, probable, or confirmed cases (3300+ suspect/probable and 8500+ confirmed cases) of Ebola and over 3700 of those resulted in death. A large portion of those deaths were healthcare providers, thus leaving an already weak and inadequate healthcare system in shambles.

The work there is far from over. To put this into perspective, there have been 34 outbreaks of various strains of the Ebola virus around the world since it was first identified in 1976. The biggest outbreak, prior to 2014, was in Northern Uganda in 2000 with 425 confirmed cases and 224 deaths. Although the number of cases has hit a plateau, still about 100+ per month the road to "0" is filled with "pot holes." The largest of which is the decimated healthcare system. So while "100+" per month sounds great, and it is compared to months ago – it is still a large number in comparison to prior outbreaks and, unlike the prior outbreaks, the detrimental assault of Ebola has touched every aspect of Sierra Leonean life.

The challenges not only include getting to "0" but building up a healthcare system that is capable of providing for basic healthcare needs, continued screening for future Ebola cases, re-starting child immunizations, just to name a few. In the event we, the world, fail to recognize the need to continue to support and partner with these countries as they rebuild, the next healthcare crisis is lurking in the shadows.....measles cases are starting to appear, rainy season is coming and with it an increase in malaria.....

It became very apparent to me while I was there that this is only the tip of the iceberg and 6 weeks was not going to be enough. After much prayer and discussion with my husband, we decided that I would recommit to return to Sierra Leone for 6 months. I will be working with the same NGO, Partners in Health (www.pih.org), who has made a long term commitment to partner with Sierra Leone to help build the "staff, stuff, space, and systems" thus being able to "provide a preferential option for the poor in health care."

As always, I would like to ask you to continue to keep me, and my family, in your prayers. I will be leaving late April for Sierra Leone. As much as I am going to miss my family, and friends, I have no doubt that this is the right decision.

Cindy