

Tackling TB in Georgia

My name is Ketí and I have been working for Gori TB Dispensary in southern Georgia for more than 12 years. During this time I have witnessed a lot of changes in the country. Unfortunately, when it comes to fighting tuberculosis (TB), the age-old stigma, which relates to TB being a disease of poverty, still applies, meaning that many people are too ashamed to seek treatment. A large part of my job involves tracking down those people who, for one reason or another, have stopped attending clinics and accepting treatment, and whose lives are in real danger as a result, as well as the lives of those around them.

“Mr Sakuashvili has been coughing for a long time, but refuses to see a doctor because he thinks that if he is diagnosed with TB he won't be able to hug his children”

It is now 10am and I am sitting in a Merlin car, heading away from Gori and towards our first appointment. The patient is a man called Surameli, who lives 23 km away from the dispensary and has not come for his check-up after an intensive phase of treatment. His house is almost in ruins; an old bed sits outside and there are dozens of empty vodka bottles scattered in the yard. When I ask Surameli why he has stopped coming to the clinic for help, he looks embarrassed and says that he cannot afford to make the journey. This is the most common reason patients give: "I would come if I had the money to get there." I give him a ticket bought by Merlin for transport to the clinic, but he is reluctant to accept it. After some persuading, he promises to come back to the clinic for more treatment.

Our next patient is not at home. The patient's wife, who greets us, seems very anxious. It emerges that she has tried to convince her husband to return to the clinic, but he won't listen to her – he often gets violent when he is drunk, and beats her and their young son. I give her a sputum pot for her husband, which she hides shyly in the pocket of her dress.

Two days ago, I visited the Sakuashvili's, who have 10 children. The family lives and sleeps in one tiny room, 4m x 5m, which has six beds. It was a familiar story here too: Mr Sakuashvili has been coughing for a long time, but refuses to see a doctor because he thinks that if he is diagnosed with TB he won't be able to hug his children; to his mind, not being diagnosed means he doesn't have the disease, so he will be able to carry on as normal. Three of the children have already been diagnosed with TB, and we suspect that two more may also be affected.

We provided the family with bus tickets to the clinic and Mrs Sakuashvili promised that she would convince her husband to visit us. However, we weren't going to get our hopes up. I could not believe my eyes when the next day, Mr and Mrs Sakuashvili walked into the surgery, with their 10 children in tow!

Our last visit on today's list is to Samkharaze, a 38-year old man who lives alone in a small village near Gori. Sadly, on arrival, we are told by a neighbour that he died recently. This is the tragic result of missed appointments and lapsed treatment. The last time I saw Samkharaze, he was lying in bed, helplessly coughing up blood. Only days earlier, he had started to feel better, and had gone back to work. And then of course, he fell severely ill again. "What else I can do?" he had said to me, "I have to live on something." He could hardly speak through the pain. An extremely sad end to my day.

I hope that tomorrow we will see more 'success' stories like the Sakuashvili family. Our aim is to encourage communities to help support each other, and to increase TB awareness and education, which we hope will in turn reduce the stigma attached to TB and encourage people to seek help. This support that Merlin provides is so desperately needed; without it, we would hear of many more cases like Samkharaze.



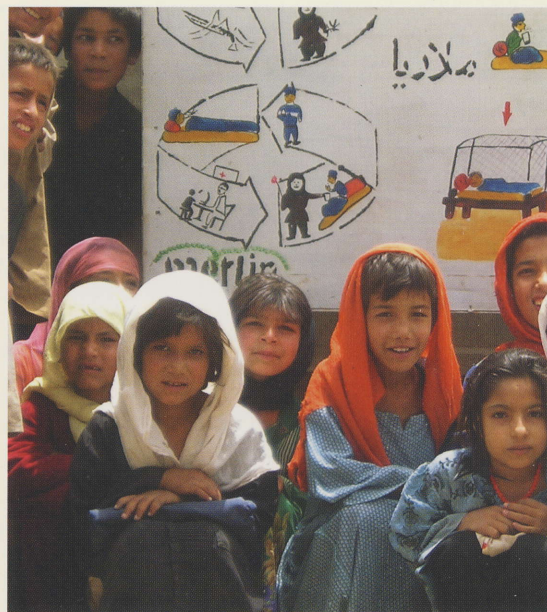
Surameli lives alone and cannot afford to travel to the dispensary for treatment

Teaming up to combat malaria

Merlin staff in Kenya and Afghanistan have come up with innovative ways of raising awareness of malaria among local communities. In Afghanistan, Merlin held a malaria awareness football tournament in June, which saw a team of expatriate aid workers from various international NGOs competing with national staff members. The event was a huge success, attracting around 5,000 men, women and children, many of whom took the opportunity to visit Merlin's on-site interactive display tent to learn about malaria and how it can be prevented.

Meanwhile in Kenya, Merlin has called on the help of the Gusii Community Health Volunteers Self Help Theatre Group. Comprising 13 young men and women, the group performs on a weekly basis in the villages of Kisii, using a combination of drama, music and mime. The aim is to educate the community in the issues surrounding malaria, in a unique and entertaining way.

Malaria is a big problem in Kenya, and Kisii in particular is badly affected. The region is isolated, rural and crowded, with a population of around one million. It is estimated that malaria causes a third of all deaths and 60% of deaths in children under 5 years old. Merlin's malaria programme began in April 2001. The team works with both the district health service and local community groups, training hundreds of nurses and medical professionals on diagnosis, treatment and preventative measures, as well as supplying essential equipment, from first-aid kits to microscopes.



Children learning about malaria in Afghanistan

The forgotten war: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

History:

The civil war in DRC, which stretches back to the country's independence in 1960, has claimed around three million lives, either as a direct result of fighting or because of disease and malnutrition. It is recognised as possibly the worst emergency to unfold in Africa in recent decades.

The need:

The war has destroyed the country's infrastructure, leaving many thousands

of people lacking food and medical care. Hundreds of thousands more have been forced to leave their homes and shelter in makeshift camps. Infant mortality rates are high due to malnutrition, and the country suffers from a severe shortage of trained medical staff and facilities.

Merlin's response:

Merlin supplies medical equipment and drugs to health centres and hospitals, provides emergency treatment to

displaced people, supports mother and child health initiatives, trains local medical staff, and runs mobile clinics in the most rural communities.

Merlin beneficiaries:

Around 2 million in total, in Lodja (Kasai Oriental Province), Kindu, Kalima and Punia (Maniema Province), Beni and Goma (Oriental and North Kivu Provinces).

The road less travelled



Etenesh and colleagues make their return journey by donkey

Merlin is well-known for reaching the most isolated communities in some of the most inaccessible areas imaginable. Etenesh, a Merlin nutrition field worker, experienced this challenge first hand, when in August 2003, she visited Koloba Jare Peasant Association, in a rural part of Arsi Zone, Ethiopia, to help carry out a nutritional survey.

"Because of the terrible roads, the only way to reach the community from Merlin's clinic in Dodota Sire was to walk or ride a mule. We left the vehicles behind and decided to set out on foot for our 15 km trek along muddy tracks and hilly roads, which sometimes had dangerous cliffs. We introduced ourselves to the local authorities and the community, who were very happy to be visited by Merlin, especially as they were so far away from the main roads.

After completing the house-to-house surveys, we rented three mules from the local authorities for our return journey. It took us two and a half hours to get back, and it was a very bumpy ride!

Despite all the difficulties on the road, I can say I am very happy and proud to be part of the Merlin team, especially when we reach communities like this, who are far from any health services. The people gave us a warm welcome and our visit really raised their spirits."

Appeal supports Iraq programme

Although the humanitarian horror stories of post war Iraq no longer hit the headlines every day in the West, life for the country's civilian population remains an uphill struggle. Faced with a dilapidated infrastructure, a severely under resourced healthcare system and a shortage of medical professionals, daily life, particularly for the poorest Iraqis, is tough.

Following a hugely successful appeal run on behalf of Merlin by the Sunday Times in April 2003, £150,000 was raised for Merlin's work in Iraq. David Wightwick, Merlin's Head of Operations, and Linda Doull, Health Director, visited Baghdad in July to assess the level of need and to see how the appeal money is being put to use.

David explains, "around 3 million people live in Baghdad and over half of those aren't able to access proper healthcare. Add to this the lack of fresh water and proper sanitation in the poorer areas, and the health risks are magnified enormously.

"There are untreated drains spewing out raw sewerage, and piles of rubbish have accumulated in many parts of Al Karkh and Al Rasafa directorates, which are among the poorest areas of the city. Children in particular are vulnerable to life-threatening diseases."

Linda adds, "Merlin's programme targets the most vulnerable people living in areas which have been largely neglected, both

pre- and post-war. We are now supporting the Ministry of Health to re-establish services in 137 primary healthcare clinics and two paediatric units in Baghdad. In addition we are improving access to safe water in these areas.



"Many of the poorest patients are unable to afford treatment, so we have been lobbying on patients' behalf to encourage local health professionals to offer free treatment to those most in need. Our teams have also provided emergency health kits to 19 paediatric hospitals, containing enough drugs for 60,000 people."

Linda admits there is a long way to go before we will see a real improvement, but says, "Merlin's work has achieved a great deal in the past few months alone and has benefited many thousands of people. Without the money raised by the Sunday Times and its readers, none of this would have been possible."

Under siege in Monrovia

Monrovia, Liberia, 25.06.03

Diary extracts by Magnus Wolfe-Murray, Country Manager, Merlin-Liberia

War has come to town. Yesterday at about 10am, residents and internally displaced people living in the north of the city started to hit the road - running away from occasional gunfire and the perception of looming danger. They weren't wrong. By 1pm the Lurd rebels had started their attack from about 30 miles north of city centre. As usual they swept down quickly and by 4pm, fighting was reported to have reached the St. Paul River, which is 4-5 miles from the city centre. This is a large area of water with only a few bridges crossing it, so it is usually a place that keeps invaders at bay - if the defending force can establish effective defences. However, the defences went up in smoke and by 5pm the rebels had crossed and were in the suburbs, which led to the displacement of most of the local population in those areas. Nobody knows exactly how many people fled, as insecurity in that part of town was so bad by about 3pm that nobody could verify, visit or monitor the situation.

One of our vehicles was stopped at a checkpoint manned by Government "special forces", just a mile or so from our office in the centre of town. The driver was ordered out at gunpoint and forced to hand over his keys. The car had been en route to one of our temporary clinics to pick up a patient in a critical condition for emergency referral to hospital. So we never made it and it is likely that the patient will have died.

Our teams have established a cholera treatment centre at a football stadium on the Southern side of the city. Local hospitals do not have the capacity to cope with cholera, which means that thousands of displaced people living in miserable conditions are at real risk. Added to that, the current security shut-down means that most cholera sufferers can't get access to treatment - tragically, most will die exactly where they lie.

President Charles Taylor stepped down in August, yet despite the ceasefire which was subsequently agreed between the two main rebel groups and the interim Liberian government, fighting still continues in parts of the country. Hundreds of thousands of people fled their homes during the crisis, and many are still in urgent need of support. Merlin is one of the only international NGOs to have remained in Liberia during the recent fighting, and continues to provide medical

relief to the most vulnerable people in Monrovia, Buchanan and Harbel.



Merlin's team carries a patient to safety in Liberia

Happy birthday Merlin

In celebration of a decade of lifesaving work around the globe, 200 guests joined Merlin at a reception and Awards Ceremony on 11 September 2003; to mark a 10-year milestone and to pay tribute to those individuals who have made an important contribution towards "saving lives and alleviating suffering" – Merlin's core mission.

Sponsored by Elsevier, the world-leading multiple media publisher of scientific, technical and medical information products and services, the event was held at J.P Morgan's Great Hall, Victoria Embankment, London. Presiding over the Award Ceremony was Sky News and former Tomorrow's World presenter, Anya Sitaram.

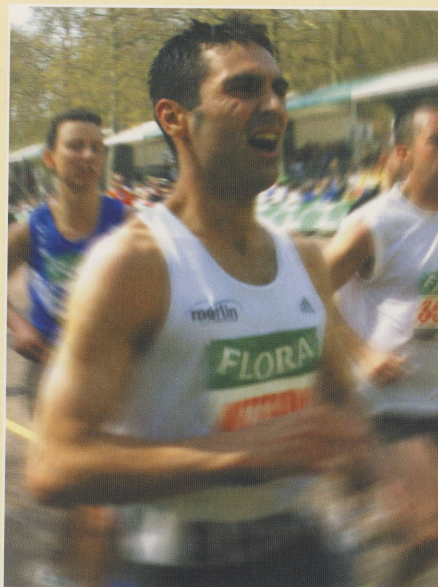
Merlin presented Olympic athlete Dr Stephanie Cook MBE with the Ambassador for Merlin Award for representing our humanitarian values and helping to create a greater awareness of the needs of people in crises; the Guardian's Africa Correspondent and Economist reporter, James Astill, received the Merlin Media Award for highlighting the plight of the people affected by the war in Congo; for championing fundraising within his community, Tim Bull received the Merlin Community Supporter Award; and the "Spirit of Merlin" Award went to Dr Aniru Conteh for his contribution to fighting Lassa fever in Sierra Leone. Merlin's promotional video, produced by MTV, which highlights the 'birth' of Merlin in 1993 and our key achievements to date, was also launched during the evening.



Dr Conteh (left) receives his award from the High Commissioner of Sierra Leone, His Excellency Alhaji S. Tejan-Jalloh (right) and Merlin's Chief Executive, Geoff Prescott

A living legacy

The three young professionals who founded Merlin in 1993 started a living legacy. With the backing of many kind donors, they dedicated their time, knowledge and skills to help alleviate human suffering. Today, Merlin continues to fulfil their vision. You too can help by including Merlin in your will, or adding a codicil to an existing will. Hundreds of millions of people around the world have limited or no access to medical services. Legacy gifts enable us to respond quickly to humanitarian emergencies, caused by war or natural disasters, whenever and wherever they arise. We hope that you will consider including Merlin in your will today to empower vulnerable people in their time of need. For an information pack about remembering Merlin in your will, please contact Imogen Ward on 020 7378 4821 or imogen@merlin.org.uk



Looking for a challenge?

The London Marathon is one of Merlin's annual fundraising highlights. Well done to the team of 2003 who raised over £51,000 through sponsorship and matched funds. We have places for the London Marathon to be held on Sunday 18th April 2004 – if this is the sort of challenge you enjoy and would like to be part of Merlin's team, please contact Liz Graham on 020 7378 4888 or liz@merlin.org.uk – there are still a few places available.

A bird's eye view on medical aid

Merlin holds information evenings on the second Thursday of every month, from 6pm, at our office in south London. These evenings are open to everyone, and offer people the opportunity to learn more about our work and to talk informally with Merlin's staff about job opportunities and working in the humanitarian aid sector generally.

At each information evening, staff from HQ or the field (if they are in London at the time), give brief updates on some of our current programmes. This presentation session normally lasts from 45 minutes to an hour, after which we adjourn to the pub – "The Ruse" – across the road from the office, which offers another opportunity to talk informally with our team.

If you would like more details about the next information evening please contact Sam Perkins on 020 7378 4888 or sam@merlin.org.uk

Please send your donation to:

Merlin, 5-13 Trinity Street,
Borough, London SE1 1DB

To make an instant donation call:

+44 (0) 20 7378 4829 (Mon – Fri; 9am to 5.30pm)

Switch board: +44 (0) 20 7378 4888

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7378 4899

Email: hq@merlin.org.uk

Web site: www.merlin.org.uk

(donations made via website are secure)

Response is published by Merlin HQ in London
Registered charity no. 1016607