

Bursary Report for the British Association of Hand Therapists

Laura Pearson - Mercy Ships, Madagascar

Introduction:

I'm a hand therapist (OT) with 9 years experience. I applied for this bursary to help cover the expenses required to volunteer with Mercy Ships.

Mercy Ships is a charitable organisation, providing free medical care to developing countries in Africa. They recruit volunteers from across the globe to come together with the same goal - to provide healthcare to those in need.

I heard of the organisation when I was in my first hand therapy position at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford in 2014. I was in awe hearing the experiences some of my colleagues there had with Mercy Ships, since then I knew it was something I wanted to do.

Topic:

Mercy Ships was founded in 1978 by Don Stephens with the purchase of the Anastasis (formerly an Italian passenger liner, now known as the 'Africa Mercy'). It is estimated that the organisation has since impacted more than 150,000 lives through surgery. As 50% of the world's population live in coastal regions, a floating hospital means greater opportunity to reach patients and offer services to many nations in need. In recent years there has been the addition of the second, purpose built 'Global Mercy' ship.

Both vessels are fully equipped to bring the patient safely through their healthcare journey. Departments include, but are not limited to pre-op assessment, radiology, labs, operating theatres, recovery, inpatient wards and outpatient follow up facilities. The ships are staffed by volunteers who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are not only positions for medical volunteers onboard. The ship would not run without essential services provided by plumbers, cooks, housekeeping, maintenance workers, deckhands, carpenters and administrative staff to name but a few!

For each mission, Mercy Ships employs day crew (people from the host country) to help support the volunteers with day-to-day tasks, and most

importantly, communicate with our patients. Every department has a team lead who ensures each day runs smoothly for staff, volunteers and patients.

My experience volunteering with Mercy Ships has been humbling. It is often easy to forget how privileged we are in the western world with our readily accessible and high-quality healthcare. I have met and treated people who have suffered from life-altering conditions and injuries. Had they been born in a Western country, they would have had timely treatment to prevent disability or minimise suffering.

A significant amount of preparatory work happens before the ship enters the port. Mercy Ships organises awareness campaigns throughout the country to inform patients of services available, how to get in contact and where they can attend screening for suitability.

I thoroughly enjoyed working within the rehabilitation team. The plastics and reconstructive surgical block was on when I arrived and the majority of hand therapy referrals were children with congenital differences or burn contracture releases. There were many supplies available for fabricating splints, carrying out optimal scar management and an abundance of toys to encourage all hand functions.

Most patients coming to the rehabilitation department were outpatients and staying at the 'Hope Centre'. The Hope Centre is a residential facility within the nearby port town where patients stay with their caregiver, if needed, for the duration of their treatment.

In the evenings and weekends there are many groups and events organised onboard which encourages camaraderie and a real sense of community amongst volunteers. During my time onboard, the Paris 2024 Olympics was being held. Volunteers organised opening and closing ceremony parties on the ship, all Olympic events were televised and we even had our own day of sporting competitions which provided a great deal of fun!

The Malagasy people I have come in contact with have been incredibly warm and welcoming. I can easily understand how many volunteers have lived for a number of years onboard the Africa Mercy, as there is a great sense of purpose, togetherness and fulfilment in what is achieved.