

MPs study tour to Banja La Mtsogolo (BLM) in Malawi with Marie Stopes International (MSI) Reproductive Health Services

Introduction

From the 10th - 19th May 2003, four Members of Parliament Martyn Jones, Jenny Tonge, Candy Atherton and Sandra Osborne travelled to Malawi to examine the reproductive health service programmes provided by MSI.

Below are details of the study tour, comments made by the MPs regarding their visit, and some selected photos.

Background information

- BLM is the leading NGO working in Sexual and Reproductive Health in Malawi.
- BLM services are spread throughout the country, based at 29 sites.
- BLM receive financial support from DfID (80%), UNFPA, SIDA, NORAD, JICA, PPFA and FFF and management support from MSI. Funding is now also being sought from the Global Health Fund for VCT and discussions are taking place with the Malawi Government to secure funding through SWAP.
- BLM offer Family Planning services including emergency contraception and sterilisation. They also provide STI information and treatment and HIV/AIDs information, education and prevention services. MVA for incomplete abortions, antenatal care, laboratory services, treatment for minor ailments, clinic for children under 5 years of age and community outreach and education services are also within BLMs remit.

MPs visited

- The British High Commission, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Ministry of Health, MPs from the Parliamentary Committee on Health, Mayors in all districts visited, BLM Board of Trustees and the management team, The Malawi National Prison, Tea and Sugar Cane plantation workers and their private medical facilities, Blantyre District Hospital (Medical ward with HIV clients) and 7 of BLMs clinic namely: Ngabu, Zingwangwa, Lunzu, Mulanje, Zomba, Mangochi and Ntcheu. MPs met with the local Malawi population and viewed community based outreach information.
- The Malawi Press followed the UK MPs on their study tour. There was press coverage on the television, on the radio and in the national newspapers. Please find some newspaper clippings:

A debriefing was organised at the end of the study tour, which included representation from the British High Commission, the MoH, the Parliamentary Committee on Health, BLM board members and staff.

The 4 UK MPs - Candy Atherton MP, Sandra Osborne MP, Martyn Jones MP and Dr Jenny Tonge MP commenting on the study tour said:

Candy Atherton MP said:

"BLM does quite exceptional work in Malawi and deserves every support. I hope they expand, reach further into rural areas and go from strength to strength."

Sandra Osborne MP said:

" I was very impressed by the quality and consistency of the service provided by BLM in the face of pressing and overwhelming need. The educational and consciousness raising methods on family planning were clearly reaping dividends as well as providing some entertaining drama for local communities. However the HIV/AIDS situation we witnessed at Blantyre District Hospital was extremely distressing - many more resources are obviously urgently needed as well as an assessment of whether or not existing funds are being deployed in the most effective way, while retaining the dignity of those who are dying.

It was a privilege to see at close quarters the positive impact that can be made on sexual and reproductive health and women's rights when the funding is made available to make it happen."

Martyn Jones MP said:

"It was my first visit to sub-Saharan Africa and it confirmed all the horror stories of the problems that those countries are experiencing.

Malawi has the advantage of a good infrastructure and a relative stable government, however the country is desperately poor and the government has only recently taken serious steps to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

We were welcomed everywhere we went by friendly people.

BLM with support from Marie Stopes International, is doing wonderful work and are extending their reproductive health services, which is necessary to provide cover to the rural areas.

Lastly I will never forget the scenes in the female medical ward in Blantyre General Hospital, where they had only cared for two HIV negative patients in two years!"

Dr Jenny Tonge MP said:

"The Aids pandemic is affecting Malawi like any other African country and, because the country is so poor, they have few resources to deal with it. NGOs, like BLM, are doing a great job on educating and providing facilities for reproductive health but

many people cannot reach the clinics or cannot afford the [very low] charges for condoms and pills.

I was very concerned that the hospitals are being totally swamped by AIDS patients. There is hardly any treatment available for them and wards built for 40 patients often contain up to 200 patients with 3 or 4 nurses trying to cope.

This not only blocks hospital beds for other patients who are to be treated but means that health professionals are demoralised and are leaving Malawi in droves - the health services in Malawi have a 40% vacancy rate.

There needs to be a new approach to provide community support [a district nursing service?] for AIDS patients and their families so that the hospitals can stop being hospices for the dying and start being proper hospitals again."