



SANS FRONTIÈRES IN ZAMBIA: BESIDE THE INVISIBLE SUFFERERS

After the initiation of the 2009 project that took us to Afghanistan, *Sans frontières*, our humanitarian aid programme in developing countries, comes to Africa. The country suggested by the World Federation of Hemophilia (WFH) is Zambia.

Our past experience was an extraordinarily happy one, both in terms of the results it achieved and the progress that it generated: in fact our new project will be more wide-ranging and will have a greater impact and higher potential since WFH has taken part in it with a role as a co-leader with Fondazione Paracelso since it first left the ground.

Zambia has a population of 13 million. Considering that one child in ten thousand has haemophilia (this is the proportion all over the world), we know that there should be more or less 1.300 patients in this country. At the moment 13 have been diagnosed, 1%. The other 99% are invisible sufferers.

So in August we set off: Flora Peyvandi, the Head of the Angelo Bianchi Bonomi Haemophilia Centre at Milan Polyclinic, a film operator and I: an exploratory voyage, the beginning of the mission in Zambia to open the country's first haemophilia centre and set up a patients' association, applying for admission to the WFH, the only worldwide haemophilia cooperation organisation.

Charity, Memory and Maurice of the newly-fledged Hemophilia Foundation of Zambia were waiting for us at Lusaka. They accompanied us on our journey and showed us their country through their eyes, only leaving us the task of managing to look and see, hear and understand the needs of persons with haemophilia and their families, whom we met on more than one occasion.

The days went by all in a state of high emotional intensity, days 18 hours long from 5.30 in the morning ending at midnight.

In the city we met the doctors and managers of the transfusion centre, surprisingly (and reassuringly) modern and well-equipped; we appraised the hospital structure to see what they have, what they lack, what we can do for them; we tried to understand whether they are able to produce at least some cryoprecipitate (the drug we used in Italy in the early seventies ...) and above all whether they have tests for hepatitis and HIV (17% of the population of Zambia is seropositive). And we met the institutions too: the Deputy Minister for Health and the Minister for Rural Community Development, who took notes and asked a lot of questions.

Then we plunged into the heart of Zambia, and Zambia of course touched our hearts. It takes about fifteen hours to get to Chinsali, in the north-east of the country. Going through Zambia, voyaging for many miles abounding in dust, buses, big trucks, people pedalling or walking by the side of the road coming from nowhere and bound for nowhere, we passed through villages with five or six clay brick houses and cane roofs, a common latrine, no electric light and no water, where bands of children with bare feet and covered in dust awaited us, a couple of haemophiliacs among them, and an adult (an "African doctor", as the sign at the entrance to the village announced, i.e. a traditional medicine man), haemophiliac too. No one either spoke or understood English, the country's official language, and so Charity translated into Bemba, the local dialect.

This is where to start from: work to take these people out of their invisible cloak, transform them from sick people into patients.



The day after, there are two children to treat in the Chinsali hospital. It is the first time with Factor VIII, up till now they have only had some cryprecipitate. There is a nurse (a very good one) whom we show how to reconstitute the drug; I also ask him to tell the little ones that they have to have an injection, it will hurt just a bit, it will only last an instant, and then they will feel better. Flora injects the bigger one first, then the smaller; not a cry, not a grimace, not a tear, only a little bird's heart fluttering rapidly under my hand.

A week after we had arrived, an aeroplane that left late in the evening brought us home to a world (the one in which I was born and in which I live) with completely different priorities. I am not always sure that I manage to pass them on... On my return from my journey to Zambia there was some small change in my pocket and many memories... the waiting room at the Ministry of Health, and on the table a crime prevention leaflet ("Protect yourself from crime!"). Inside, some photos to go with the text: a man stealing a car, another looking at a frightened girl lasciviously. The thief and the molester, in short the bad ones to beware of, are white. On the other hand, our mothers and grandmothers have always said to children, "Be good or I'll call the black man and he'll carry you away". In Africa, they did not even call the white man, but he came just the same and took many, many of them away...

Andrea Buzzi

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