



Mission: South Sudan & Uzbekistan

Frontlines: 'No Magicians but Doctors Without Borders'

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I came to know about MSF in 2005 while doing a community assessment in a remote village in Afghanistan. At the time, MSF was no longer working there, but the community still remembered their effort. I was surprised and did a Google search and found MSF. I was really moved by the mission and vision of MSF and decided to apply as an expat medical doctor. Due to some personal reasons, it was delayed, and at last I got my first mission in 2009 for southern Sudan.



I was sent for my Preparation for Primary Departure (PPD) course, as well as for my briefing, to Amsterdam. Before that I got a very nice welcoming briefing in Delhi, my recruitment centre. In my PPD, most of the presentation was based on the experience of working in southern Sudan. After being loaded with information and experience from the field, oh my God, I was scared about where I was going. But, as I was boosted with MSF spirit, I decided to proceed, and I went to Sudan on a nine-month mission to a place called Leer.

After a long time travelling and a lot of briefings, I reached my project in a very small MSF plane. I was overwhelmed by the health situation of the population and was confused about how to deliver quality of care in a remote setting with minimum resources. I was not sure whether I would be able to finish my mission.

But now it is 2011. I finished my southern Sudan mission and went on to do a second mission in Uzbekistan, and I am now waiting for my third mission. My experiences with MSF have been completely different. In Sudan, I was responsible for a primary healthcare hospital, and we provided health services targeting mostly children under five and pregnant mothers. Our main focus was to treat infectious diseases, including TB. I had to treat my first case of tetanus and rabies there. We also had a therapeutic feeding centre and provided basic surgery. It was sometimes difficult to save lives in a situation where resources were so constrained.

In Uzbekistan the situation was the opposite. It is a country which has healthcare services, but is experiencing an epidemic of drug-resistant TB which the Ministry of Health (MoH) is unable to handle. MSF provides TB care to the

population of a province called Karakalpakstan, with the help of the MoH. The main challenge in this mission was to work with the MoH, and introducing TB doctors to new ideas to treat TB was sometimes difficult.

But whatever the challenges, I enjoyed being with MSF. I felt my knowledge was valued and I could contribute to saving lives. I cried and I laughed in the missions; I was frustrated; but at the same time I felt that if MSF had not been there, these people would not have had a chance to survive. I will never forget the smile in people's faces when we could save a life, nor will I ever forget the lives we lost.



Working for MSF is also an opportunity to learn about cultures and to see how people live in different parts of the world. Living in a remote setting with a multicultural expat team helped me to get to know other cultures. It is also an environment to exchange ideas. I learnt a lot from my team, both personally and professionally.

Now I am at home but, when I look back, my efforts to save lives make me feel satisfied. I will never forget the words of

one of my paediatric patients. She was admitted for severe anaemia followed by multiple malarial infection. We had to put a lot of effort into saving her, as collecting blood for a patient is a big challenge in Sudan. But when she had recovered, I realised that she was following me in my ward round from a distance. So one day I asked her what she was looking for. She told me, "I want to see what magic you have in your hands that you can save people's lives". I could not explain to her that we do not have magic, and that we too have limitations. But, yes, I also believe that MSF gives neglected people, who do not have anyone to take care of them, a second chance to live. We do not do magic but, yes, we save lives.

-Sabrina Sharmin MD