



BUILT FOR THE RICH, SERVING THE POOR

Once a cruise liner for the idle rich kicking their heels between Italy and Hong Kong, the Anastasis today tends to the surgical needs of the needy and destitute in Africa's poorest nations, crewed by volunteers who pay to work.

Currently the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship, the 159 metre, 11 700 ton vessel spent 6 weeks in September and October docked in Cape Town, drumming up publicity and taking on fresh supplies of medicine, food and fuel.

Izindaba toured the 13-story mercy ship shortly before it sailed for Monrovia in Liberia to join an advance 'preparation team' that helps spread word of their services, arrival date and with planning triage and screening in a vast football stadium.

With 3 operating theatres and half of their 88 beds designated for recovery, the international medical team (including several South Africans) conducts an average of 16 surgical procedures per day. These include up to 8 ocular, 4 plastic (mainly burn contractures), 3 vesico-vaginal fistula, 4 general (hernias predominating) or 2 goitre operations.

While the epidemiological impact of the mercy ship's visits is almost impossible to assess, for the individual who has a potentially life-threatening and/or disfiguring tumour, their offer of service is impossible to forget.

The maxillofacial work can often dominate and serve as a dramatically visible beacon of hope to similarly afflicted people in the community.

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The mercy ship Anastasis docked in Cape Town harbour en route to Liberia last month.

Picture: Chris Bateman

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Each on-board theatre has a local interpreter hired by the pivotal advance reconnaissance team whose work includes preparing the way for community health development, educational services, job creation and church empowerment work.

Over the 8 months of their stay in Liberia the impact of this total mercy package will be indelible, given the huge needs and lack of infrastructure and sophistication.

The ship's communications officer, Gordon Tyler, tells of one volunteer teacher witnessing her Liberian counterpart leading a primary school class in reciting, while pointing to figures on the board, 'one plus one equals box'.

Community health education, including HIV prevention, takes place in church and municipal halls and is adapted to local customs – an approach that results in the most important messages taking root and spreading.

Not every country can be visited regularly to ensure these roots gain a firm and lasting hold.

Peace before healing

Liberia's 14 years of war and political strife prevented any kind of lasting philanthropic input with only United Nations peacekeepers providing the local populace with tangible evidence that anybody cared.

Says Gareth Jones, the young British crew doctor, 'just the fact that a civilian ship pulls in with crew from all over the world has a major psychological impact'.

The mercy ship planners use the World Health Organization (WHO) development index (accessibility of health care, literacy and income) to plot their destinations, prioritising the most needy nations.

Sonja Frischknecht, an ICU nurse from Australia who has been on board virtually without a break for 10 years, and whose family think she is 'dinkum mad', says the Anastasis 'fills a unique gap in the market, because there are many NGOs out there'.



'Most of the other outfits don't have a complex surgical ability and, for example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) send us quite a lot of cases, their purpose being to restore dignity and hope to those who have been denied basic surgical care for so long, which then leads to patients requiring more complex procedures'.

Conversely, the triage and screening done by Anastasis volunteers often result in, for example, referrals of tropical diseases to MSF and liaison with other NGOs.

The value of the ship's sophisticated CT scanner is realised when you consider that there are only two others (excluding Nigeria) in all of West Africa, notes Ray Stoddard, a diehard volunteer who calls himself 'a former village physician from England turned crew member and general factotum'. Ray, an internal medicine specialist, has been spending between 3 and 7 months on board every year for the past 7 years.

The ship's chief medical officer is Dr Gary Parker, an American maxillofacial surgeon specialising in cleft palates, who has 18 years' service. Like several others, he lives on board with his wife and 2 children, aged 11 and 7 years.

To qualify for family living, volunteers must commit to at least 3 years of service and have no more than 2 children.

'Christianity in action'

The large majority of the 350 crew members are committed Christians whose screening has included the question, 'What does Christianity mean to you?'

I ask Sonja, who manages the health care services on board and raises R40 000 every year to pay for her 'passage' and work, what keeps her going. 'The passion of knowing I've been given an education to share with others to improve their quality of life. I want to see others in a better place than they are.' She says that her decade on

board has turned her priorities in life 'on their head'.

A quarter of the ship's running costs are paid for through volunteer payments like hers, and are structured on a two-tier affordability basis. A wide range of companies donate finance, cargo and services in support of the mercy ships (Anastasis is part of a fleet of 3). Every unrestricted pound or euro received is exceeded by over R14 in contributed gifts-in-kind and services. The medical community donates drugs, equipment, supplies and skills while port fees and associated costs are regularly waived by hosting countries.

Suez closure 'a blessing'

The closure of the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1975, while costing the global economy billions of dollars, proved a blessing for the poorest of the poor because it led to the Anastasis being 'laid to rest' in Venice when it became unprofitable.

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Enter Don Stephens, one of the leading lights in Youth with a Mission (YWAM), a Christian grouping inspired by a suggestion made during a prayer meeting in the mid 1960s. A group of about 145 YWAM members were caught in hurricane Cleo in the Bahamas during a summer Outreach. A young woman wondered aloud how helpful a 'mercy ship' would be in the hurricane aftermath. Stephens secured the approval of his board, heard of what was then named the Victoria idle at her Venetian moorings, and with the help of a Swiss bank loan paid the R5 million asking price.

That was in 1978. Three years later she had been transformed into a hospital

ship and ready to head off on an altogether different type of cruise.

The first outreach voyage was to New Mexico in 1983 and since then two other hospital ships have been purchased to bolster the mercy ships fleet.

Three ships 'shaping up'

They are the African Mercy (6 theatres, 78 beds – twice the size of the Anastasis on-board hospital) due for launch in May next year after languishing for 4 years in a Newcastle dockyard that went bankrupt, and the Caribbean Mercy, currently docked in Mobile, Alabama, where her eye and orthopaedic surgical capabilities are being put on the back burner in order to respond to the hurricane Katrina disaster (1 theatre).

The Caribbean Mercy covers the Caribbean Basin, offloading her equipment and crew to do land-based work in under-serviced hospitals and clinics.

Crew volunteers on the Anastasis told *Izindaba* that there was rarely a dull moment on board with the rich and diverse cultures, aerobics, CNN, DVD movies, ballroom dancing, musical evenings and dynamic social life.

'It depends on people's creativity. Last time in Liberia the ship's crew put on *Les Misérables* for the rest of us,' chuckles Frischknecht.

Just how close-knit the Anastasis community becomes is perhaps best illustrated by the 220 marriages that have taken place between volunteers in the 25 years of her mercy cruising.

Anyone wishing to volunteer for a spell on the Anastasis (anaesthetists, eye surgeons, dentists and ICU nurses tend to be prioritised) can download an application form at www.mercyships.org or contact Ric Amansure, tel. (021) 715-4944.

Chris Bateman