Memories of unforgettable moments woven in beautiful Zambia

My husband got an appointment at Roan Consolidated Copper Mines and together with him I went to Zambia in 1979. Since future prospects seemed good, friends persuaded me to explore possibilities of joining the Mine Hospital. The well respected Sri Lankan Paediatrician and Gynaecologist had already briefed the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) about me. I was however, a bit reluctant to face the situation as I had only an year's experience as an intern house officer and a few months at the central blood bank where my only duty was grouping and cross-matching blood.

Few days later I was called for an interview with the CMO. The interview was successful. The hurdle to clear came next – the interview with the Assistant CMO. I had already heard from my friends that he was quite strict. His stare through the glasses gave me a shiver and I was having palpitations. I told him about my experience in medicine and surgery appointments taking care not to mention about the blood bank. He checked my knowledge on liver function tests and I fared well. I faced a few more questions and fared well again. "Okay, final question. What do you see in this this xray?". My stars were good and my soul was thanking my past bosses and teachers: Dr R P Jayawardane, Dr Nagaratnam, Dr U S Jayawickreme and my very good friend Vajira Tennekoon (who was a SHO at that time). It was a case of multiple myeloma (MM). Without batting an eyelid, I poured out all I knew about MM and BJ protein etc. thanking Dr Doris Peiris for those long lectures on BJ. I got the job.

I enjoyed my work, though I was placed in the paediatric ward where there was no rest. One day I completed the afternoon ward round and decided to sit and read a book, as the ward was quiet. A few minutes later, a little baby who was being treated for bronchopneumonia suddenly developed severe dyspnoea. The urgent x-ray showed a ruptured pneumatocele leading to a pneumothorax. We immediately introduced an intercostal tube and gradually she improved and was scheduled to be discharged 14 days later.

One afternoon I was on my way to the hospital when I was bleeped and informed that she had become dyspnoeic again. I accelerated to reach her bedside as soon as possible to introduce the intercostal tube. I just could not pass this massive car in front of me, which just would not speed, and I could not overtake it due to the double lines on the road. The traffic regulations were so stringent, that had I done the wrong thing the video camera would have spotted me. My bleep was going on "Dr Samara, call from Ronald Ross, ward 1 sister wants you urgently" Yet, I had to lag behind this load of metal, tooting the horn continuously, but he would not speed. Fortunately, the sister did not reach the CMO as she knew that something was the matter as I usually respond promptly to such messages. I

arrived just in time to save the baby by introducing the tube. The sweet little baby girl survived that episode also, and was discharged from hospital. A few days later, I saw Emily the mother getting down from this same huge car with the baby. The man who would not exceed the speed limit and followed the traffic rules to the letter was none other than this baby's father. He had to do so because, as I later discovered, he was the magistrate of the area. Today this baby and her twin should be 22 years old.

I was due to have my first baby a few months later. The CMO, Mr. Kirwan, an Irishman who today I remember with deep gratitude, stopped me in the corridor and said I didn't look well. My BP was checked and it was high and my urine was positive for albumin. I was not allowed to go home, but warded immediately, although I had four more weeks to go. My blood pressure wouldn't settle, the albumin persisted, and oedema increased. Sphygmomanometers were changed and new albumin dip sticks were brought ruling out the possibilities of instrumental errors. I was the first lady doctor in the Mine Hospital network to face this type of situation (there were only a few lady doctors and most were closer to menopause). The obstetrician was more tensed up than anyone else, as it was too early to intervene. A nurse was checking my blood pressure and the foetal heart rate round the clock. It was not easy then to assess foetal maturity. Ultrasound scanning had just been introduced and Mary Hewitt, the radiologist, had not the experience to give an assessment, especially to a woman doctor.

The old method of identifying foetal maturity was by an x-ray and identifying the foetal patella or tibial tuberosity or some such thing. The x-ray was done on Tuesday and the maturity was assessed. The gynaecologist wanted the radiologist's opinion. The latter visits the hospital only once a week and he was not due until Thursday. I was wheeled into the doctor's rest room for a cup of tea. All my colleagues looked shocked, as I had swelled up so much. My colleagues had immediately informed Mr. Kirwan that something was wrong. A LSCS was fixed for Wednesday 8 a.m. When I was wheeled into the theatre, everyone was staring at me. I saw new equipment, and oxygen cylinders lined up which I had never seen being around before. They were all getting ready for my delivery. When I passed my children's ward the kids who usually run up to me (the well ones, especially the fellows with sickle cell anaemia who come only for the blood transfusion) ran up to my trolley, singing their famous song "Va doctor vaisang" – "*our doctor is coming*", little knowing the seriousness of the situation. Apparently the routine hospital work had been disrupted as most were praying for me and were impatient to see the outcome. I heard that the most experienced theatre nurse, Sister Johnston, was not able to fix up the oxygen cylinder properly due to fear more than excitement.

Seasonal fare

Well the grand finale to this fearful episode was that finally I was sectioned and there came out a baby girl who was living on one strand of placental tissue, with the rest of the placenta dead. If the LSCS had been postponed the worst would have happened, but today we have her, and

my second born has a lovable *akki*. An emotional moment was months later when I saw my baby and the twins playing together while waiting for their immunisation. Few years later we left Zambia, the beautiful copper rich country with these unforgettable memories.

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