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special

# The miracle ship that saves lives... like Alfred's

DISEASES THAT ARE CURABLE IN THE WEST ARE **KILLING PEOPLE** IN THE POOREST COUNTRIES OF **WEST AFRICA**. BUT NOW HUNDREDS OF VOLUNTEERS ARE **GIVING THEIR HELP** WHERE THEY'RE NEEDED MOST

Mercy Ships International/  
Scott Harrison and Joshua Fletcher

Dr Gary Parker and Peter McDermott perform surgery on board Mercy Ship Anastasis



It's hard to comprehend the true extent of 14-year-old ALFRED's suffering. Look at his photograph—if your first reaction is to recoil in horror, then imagine what he's been through in his short life.

Alfred's family is from a small fishing village in Benin, West Africa. They live on less than 53p a day in a mud hut, without electricity or running water. Each day is a struggle for survival. When Alfred was 10, he developed a facial tumour and his parents thought he'd been cursed by witchcraft. There was no money for medicine, so the tumour grew and grew until it became life-threatening.

Alfred's situation is horrific—but perhaps the most heart-rending thing

**The witch doctor sacrificed chickens to cure Alfred's tumour, but it kept growing**

is that he isn't alone in his suffering. Alfred is one of hundreds of people in Benin whose serious conditions have become critical because there's no hope of the kind of treatment we take for granted in the UK.

Many of these people would probably die if it weren't for Mercy Ships—an incredible organisation made up entirely of volunteers. The charity runs a fleet of ships staffed by doctors, nurses, teachers and agriculturalists from all over the world, who offer their services, skills, food and medicines for free. The ships visit some of the world's poorest cities, one of which is Cotonou, Benin.

Every day, thousands of people queue for hours in the hope that they will be one of the few who are given life-changing treatment on board Anastasis—the Mercy Ship in Benin. British surgeon Peter McDermott

has volunteered on Anastasis—the largest non-governmental hospital ship in the world—for two weeks every year since 1996. He specialises in rebuilding the faces of patients who have suffered disfiguring conditions due to accidents or disease.

'It's a great leveller to come here,' says Mr McDermott. 'You think things are bad in the UK, but then you see the diseases in West Africa and get a real sense of perspective.'

In the UK, Mr McDermott works 8am to 6pm, with two days spent operating and three days running outpatient clinics. On Anastasis, he works the same hours but his schedule is dominated by surgery.

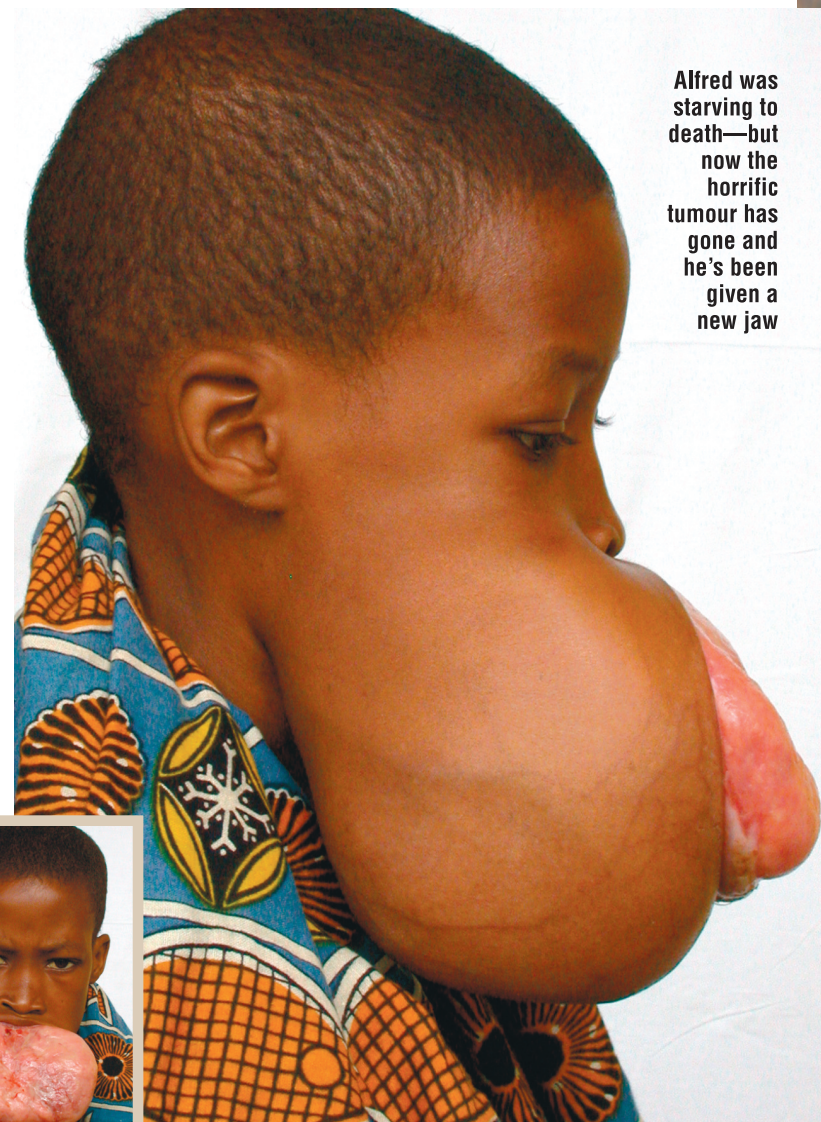
'The work's more demanding, but also more stimulating and challenging,' he says. 'The diseases are dramatic and the surgery's therefore more complex.'

Alfred's family scrimped and saved for the \$10 (£5.30) taxi ride to the ship. When Alfred arrived, he was dying of starvation.

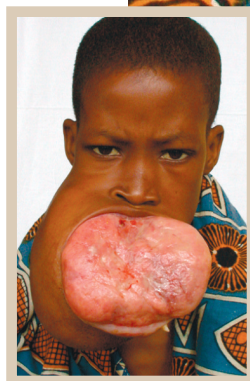
He weighed just 3st 2lb (20kg) and his tumour alone weighed 5lb.

Alfred had only developed the tumour two years earlier. Like lots of boys his age, he'd got in a fight and returned home with a sore jaw from a well-placed punch. That same week, the rare, fast-growing facial tumour appeared. His parents took Alfred to the village witch doctor, who made holes in the young boy's face with knives, spread plant extracts on him, and sacrificed chickens to cure him.

But Alfred's tumour grew, pushing his tongue back into his throat and forcing the floor of his mouth down and away from his face. 'I was always crying—



Alfred was starving to death—but now the horrific tumour has gone and he's been given a new jaw



'I thought one day I'd die,' he says.

'I was afraid of the herbalist. I thought the tumour would go down after he treated it but later I realised that it was all lies.

'When I went to church, people used to follow me home and pray for me—

sometimes they'd even give me money.'

Soon, the tumour absorbed the teeth in Alfred's bottom jaw and he could no longer speak. His parents took him to St Luke's Hospital in Cotonou but doctors couldn't offer a cure.

His uncle took him to another hospital in nearby Lokossa, but to no avail. Two



Alfred's a celebrity in his village after his amazing transformation

table, Alfred was free of the tumour that had

months later he was referred to yet another hospital—this time across the border, in Togo—but his family could no longer afford the cost of travel.

Alfred's dad, Bessan, catches fish, which his mum cooks and sells in the market. They have three sons and four daughters to support, and had visited 15 witch doctors in a desperate attempt to save their son.

The tumour was by now the size of a melon and spilt out of Alfred's mouth. To eat, he'd force a hand between the tumour and the roof of his mouth, and push food in as best he could. He was so embarrassed by his appearance, he'd try to cover his face with a cloth.

Last autumn, a visiting pastor who was moved by Alfred's plight told his parents about the Mercy

Ship that was coming to Benin, with a team of doctors who might be able to help.

The family was sceptical—but fellow church members helped raise the money to get him there and, in November, Alfred joined a queue of more than 5,000 sick people desperately hoping to be cured.

One of the most harrowing jobs on the Mercy Ships is screening potential patients. The staff can't possibly treat them all, so trained nurses select those with the best chance of successful treatment.

Thankfully, Alfred was one of them. He saw reconstructive surgeon Dr Tony Giles for a consultation, and then his tumour was tested by a pathologist and found to be benign. Alfred was scheduled for surgery the following Thursday.

After three hours on the operating

been killing him. And a month later, he was given a new jaw by a British and German surgeon, who took two ribs and pieces of bone from his hip and grafted them to the plate that now forms his lower jaw.

By this time he'd put on 20lb, the excess skin from the bulging tumour had begun to shrink, and he'd started learning to speak again. On the Anastasis, and back in his village, Alfred's become something of a celebrity.

'Mercy Ships won't solve all West Africa's health problems, but we're one step closer with each life we make a difference to,' says Jo Price, 32, a paediatric nurse from Buckinghamshire.

'I work on Anastasis caring for patients before and after surgery. It's hard to understand what it's

## the facts

**35,000** children a day worldwide die from diseases linked to poverty and malnutrition.

**Two** out of every **five** people worldwide are malnourished.

Mercy Ships has performed more than **8,000** operations on board.

It's treated more than **200,000** people in village medical clinics and performed **100,000** dental treatments.

It's completed more than **350** construction and agriculture projects.



# The **miracle ship** that **saves lives**

like not to have a local A&E, or an ambulance to take you there when your child's just spilt boiling water over themselves.

'I'd love to do this again—it's a privilege to be part of the life-changing care that's given here for free.'

For DELFINE, who's 16, the Mercy Ships organisation has made an enormous difference to her life. For eight years a tumour grew on the side of her face, causing her unbearable pain. By the time she arrived at Anastasis, the growth was the size of an orange and had pushed out the skin surrounding her left eye.

'I was very unhappy,' she says. 'People mocked me and made me cry. They insulted me because of my sickness so I stayed at home and never went anywhere.'

'If I did go out, I had to cover my face. I sold peanut cakes but people came and bought them from my house so I didn't have to brave the outside world.'

Delfine arrived at Anastasis in January 2005, hoping to be given the chance to live a normal life like any other girl of her age. Chief medical officer Dr Gary Parker enlisted the help of a specialist, who used the ship's laboratory to analyse a biopsy of Delfine's tumour.

It was benign, but an X-ray showed it was pushing in part of the skull. If it wasn't removed, it would continue to distort her features.

'In the UK, Delfine's lump would have been



**In the UK, a facial disfigurement like Delfine's would have been dealt with much earlier in her life. She had to suffer eight years of pain and insults**



**'I won't have to cover my face any more,' says Delfine after her Mercy Ships surgery**

**It's a privilege to be part of the life-changing care that's given by Mercy Ships**

dealt with much earlier,' says Mr McDermott. 'A visit to the local GP would have resulted in immediate testing and then removal, especially given her age.'

Luckily, Delfine's surgery was a success. Now, the young girl who wouldn't look people in the eyes smiles again. 'I'm happy when I look at myself now,' she says. 'My life is going to change. I won't have to cover my face any more.'

Since it was launched in 1978, Mercy Ships has performed 8,000 operations on board—everything from correcting cataracts and crossed eyes to facial reconstruction.

Its two ships, the Anastasis and Caribbean Mercy, are staffed by 635 volunteers and have completed projects in more than 70 port areas around the world. They spend between four and seven months in a port, and often return within a year. Some patients are given appointment cards for follow-up treatments.

The organisation's newest ship, Africa Mercy, has a crew capacity of 450. It's still

**Dr Gary Parker examines a patient**



being built but is due to be launched later this year. When finished, it will be the biggest charity hospital ship in the world.

But the charity's work extends beyond its fleet of ships. Volunteers treat people in village medical clinics, teach local healthcare workers, and work on construction and agriculture projects in the poorest parts of the world.

Mercy Ships is staffed by permanent and short-term volunteers from all over the world. Not only do they give their time for free, they also raise their own finances and pay crew fees.

Elizabeth Hunter first volunteered on Anastasis three years ago when the ship was in Togo. A midwife from Yorkshire, Elizabeth worked in mission hospitals in Israel and India, where she adopted a little girl, Dipti, whose mother had died in childbirth.

Elizabeth retired six years ago, aged 60, and decided to devote her time to Mercy Ships, training local village midwives. So far, she's been on three visits with Anastasis, and she'll go to Liberia when the ship docks there later this year.

'Infant mortality and the number of women having difficulties in childbirth are major issues in West Africa, where there's limited access to health education,' says Dipti, now 30. 'My mum is doing what she can to help improve the mothers' health and the infants' chance of survival.'

Mercy Ships doesn't just rely on medical expertise. Every single one of its volunteers, from the ships' cooks to engineers, is crucial.

Tony van Alstine, 23, has worked with Mercy Ships twice over the past two years. He first volunteered on Anastasis as a deckhand for seven months in 2003, after finishing his final year at medical school, and his second stint began in December 2004.

He'll be on board for 10 months. 'I could have been a doctor earning lots of money,' he says. 'It was a tough decision but this is what I want to do.'

For Mr McDermott, who leaves his wife and four teenage children in England to join the Anastasis crew, it's enough to know that the time he spends with Mercy Ships can make a difference.

'The need in West Africa is overwhelming—it's not enough for me just to give money. Luckily, I have the skills to do something about it.'

■ Mercy Ships is now raising money for the Africa Mercy project. Write to Mercy Ships UK, 12 Meadway Court, Stevenage, Herts SG1 2EF; call 01438 727800, or e-mail [info@mercyships.org.uk](mailto:info@mercyships.org.uk). For information on becoming a shipmate, visit [www.mercyships.org](http://www.mercyships.org)

■ JENNY VEREKER