



AN AFRICAN ADJUSTMENT

By Dr Roisin Durcan, BChiro, MNZCA



An 86-year-old lady sits on the chiropractic table explaining in animated Setswana (the official language of Botswana) how last week, unable to walk, she was rescued by a gang of village children with a wheelbarrow.

Outside the door people are gathering on the red soil of our 'waiting room' and pulling up chairs under the shade of the tree. Women's heads are adorned with colorful scarves and hats, men are wearing threadbare suits and children are tied to their mothers' backs with towels. Setswana chatter fills the air, punctuated by the crowing of roosters and the clang of cow-bells. Each person clutches a scrapbook, the cover personalised with cuttings from magazines cellotaped into place. These scrapbooks are their 'medical cards' – the outer cover a story of the person, the inside a story of their medical world.

This is how the days roll by at the World Spine Care (WSC) Clinic in Shoshong, Botswana. My partner is the current full-time chiropractor running the Botswana clinics and I have spent seven months over the last year, alongside other volunteer health professionals from across the globe (mostly chiropractors and physiotherapists), working as a chiropractor with WSC in both Botswana and Tanzania.

Founded by Scott Haldeman, WSC is a global organisation on a mission to bring sustainable, evidence-based, integrated, primary spine care to under-served communities globally. The Botswana Clinic was WSC's pilot project, opening its doors in 2012.

The original clinic is in rural Shoshong where a portacabin sits amidst clusters of mud huts at the base of the surrounding hills. The hills of Shoshong provide welcome relief from the otherwise flat plains of Botswana. They have watched Shoshong over the years change from a place of central importance to a quiet village off the beaten track, with a population of 7,000. The second clinic runs two days a week in the Mahalapye hospital, a town of 50,000, and the patient base has grown to see people hitchhike distances of over 700km to receive care.

Each day within the walls of the WSC clinics, the story of the people of Botswana unfolds. There are voluptuous Mma's (women) with

chronic low back pain and knees exhausted from hard work and heavy bodies, who charm you with their simplistic statements and highly expressive body language. There are young bodies ravaged too early from HIV, often with severe neurological changes as HIV renders one 40% more likely to suffer a stroke.

There are old men, spritely for 70 years of age, who practice their English with jokes and a twinkle in their eye. There are farmers, both men and women, their bodies strong but worn from long days working the land in the searing sun.

Presentations are wide and varied, however chronic spinal pain is a recurrent theme. In a population where manual labour is central to daily life, debilitating spinal disorders directly affect an individual and their family's standard of living. The ability to walk, lift, and bend can be the deciding factor for whether there's food on the table at the end of the day. For those with little to no access to care, WSC is bridging a profound gap in the healthcare system.

Fairly extensive paperwork and detailed documentation is used for each person. Histories, elaborated through a translator, further prolong the initial visits, so an appointment usually takes about an hour with each follow-up approximately 15 minutes. The paperwork is often littered with red flags and comorbid factors, which is a succinct statement of the state of health in the country. The medical card that each citizen brings is a running record of every medical visit they've had since birth, providing a short (or often long) clinical background.

Two translators help to run the front desk and translate during each appointment. We get to know each of the patients and follow their progress. One of the reasons I like the WSC model is the focus on sustainability, which ensures continued access to care. Through collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the project aims to eventually be self-sufficient, and two local people are currently training on scholarships at Canadian Memorial College of Chiropractic and Palmer College. On graduating they will run the clinics.

The WSC clinics also function as research facilities collecting epidemiological data on spinal disorders in the developing world. In Botswana this includes an ethnographic study of the burden of spinal conditions in Shoshong, longitudinal treatment outcome studies, and research tracking the nature and frequency of musculoskeletal conditions occurring in patients who are living with HIV/AIDS.

A central tenet of the WSC approach is public education, and so initiatives such as 'Straighten Up' and Scoliosis Screening programmes in the local schools take place. Each appointment is an opportunity to discuss broader topics of health and to encourage patient responsibility and understanding, as well as nurturing active participation in their health and healing.

The patients slowly filter through, and the crowd under the tree has dwindled. Another day at the office in Shoshong comes to a close.

We drive away, passing a couple of donkeys pulling the back of an old dismantled ute, the number plate crudely painted on. During the trip home we dodge donkeys and Tswana cattle (an indigenous breed) and swerve to avoid potholes. Communal grazing means livestock spends its days wandering the roadside, and a large proportion of the time loitering in the middle of the road.

At the end of a day in Shoshong there's always a story that's touched you a little more poignantly than you were prepared for. Sometimes the car is full of laughter and sometimes it's quietly contemplative. Either way, somewhere amongst the dusty red soil, mud huts and dolomite hills, the people of Shoshong have nestled their way into your heart.

For more information on World Spine Care:
www.worldspinecare.org

Roisin Durcan volunteered for WSC last year for six weeks and has returned three times, locuming in New Zealand in-between. She will be returning to Botswana later in 2015 and is available for locum work in New Zealand. Contact her at roisindurcan@gmail.com

The NZCA supports Roisin's work by sponsoring her membership of the NZCA.