

# “The very heart of nursing remains the same...”

**David Thomas, is a tuberculosis (TB) consultant nurse and lead for our TB service, which diagnoses and treats all cases of TB and related infections across east Dorset and into the New Forest. Here's his global journey...**

“After leaving college in 1988 I spent a year working in rural Eswatini (Swaziland) where I began to appreciate the diverse effects of poverty on people's lives. After the Romanian revolution in 1989/90 I joined a small team working in one of their orphanages.



These experiences kindled my belief that professional nursing knowledge, management and skills need to be shared globally, perhaps now more than ever.

“I trained as a nurse in Southampton in the early 1990's with a view to working overseas in the aid sector. After gaining emergency experience and studying tropical nursing, I joined Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and spent a year working alongside paediatric and emergency teams based in the Gaza Strip.

“Our main focus was improving basic and emergency care and we were privileged to work with teams of resilient nurses who, despite losing family and colleagues during the ongoing military conflict, still embraced opportunities to improve their patients' care. This coincided with the Western wall tunnel riots in September 1996 in which fierce clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli Defence Force quickly spread from the West Bank to Gaza. On the worst day of fighting more than 1,500 casualties were brought into the ED at Gaza's main hospital and sadly over 100 people died.

“We operated a tiny four bed resuscitation unit and I remember a mound of discarded blood soaked shoes, trainers and army boots that steadily grew against the wall like an inappropriate memorial to those who lost their lives.



**“It's the patients' individual stories and how we fit into this in a tiny way that brings this job to life...”**



“Later that year I joined Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Belgium and was posted to a Siberian Gulag where a small international team initiated and supervised treatment for 1,800 prisoners with multidrug-resistant TB.



**“Nearly all of our patients are seeking a better life for themselves and their families...”**

“Understandably that was quite an oppressive environment in which to work but it kindled my belief for all countries to play an active role in managing TB.

“In 1998, I was posted to Southern Sudan and led a small team running a bush hospital and feeding centre in a remote refugee camp. MSF had worked there for a few years treating victims of the civil war and feeding thousands more facing starvation. This was a fantastic project working directly with the very tall Dinka tribe, who incidentally have the lowest doors imaginable to their grass huts. I believe this was deliberate to fend-off predators - and my need to approach these on hands and knees always caused laughter!



**“Nursing knowledge and skills need to be shared globally, perhaps now more than ever.”**

“Very sadly a government backed militia attacked the village and killed around 20 people and took others as slaves/hostages.

“After escaping into the bush we faced a dilemma of walking to the next air strip (two-three days away) or returning to the scene. We knew the militia were moving fast so returned to the village and did our best to treat the survivors. Some died but we were able to evacuate others by an MSF chartered plane a few days later. Sadly the ongoing threat of further attacks ended our mission and I soon returned to the UK to marry my wife Rachel in 1999 and settle back in west Dorset.

“For the past 18 years I've been incredibly privileged in leading a local TB service, treating incredible people from all over the world. It's a fantastic job that has evolved into a nurse-led service. Nearly all of our patients are seeking a better life for themselves and their families and have encountered life-long barriers. Many are scared and appreciate that left untreated; TB will destroy their livelihood and potentially lead to social discredit and mortality. The majority of patients we work with have experienced adverse stigma due to race, colour or vulnerable status, so to be able to welcome them to our trust and offer treatment and support is a fantastic privilege. While my role is somewhat different to working overseas, many of our patients aren't and it's their individual stories and how we fit into this in a tiny way that brings this job to life.

“Nursing has evolved beyond belief. Few jobs offer a greater scope for practice or the ability to travel and bridge the gap between clinical practice and academia. Through excellent support from the trust and the National Institute for Health Research, I have been able to gain both first and masters degrees and encourage others to seize these opportunities.

“But despite the advances, the very heart of nursing remains the same - as a nurse, your actions will make a difference to the lives of your patients, your colleagues, your community and your profession.”



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