

Interview

“MGH - Harvard is committed to long term partnership with the government and people of South Sudan”

Dr Thomas Burke is Chief of the Division of Global Health and Human Rights at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), a Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School, a faculty of the Committee on African Studies at Harvard University, and a physician at MGH and Children's Hospital Boston. Since 2008, at the request of Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) and the World Bank, Dr. Burke has been working with the Ministry of Health (MOH) in the areas of maternal and child health and capacity building.

Dr Eluzai Abe Hakim, UK-based Editor of SSMJ, interviewed him.



Figure 1. Dr Burke and Dr Wani Mena (CEO Juba Teaching Hospital and South Sudan-based Editor of SSMJ) assessing the hospital for clinical training in May 2011

What was the purpose of your first visit in 2008 and what did you accomplish?

Our main purpose was to find out how we might help South Sudan improve maternal and child health. We met leaders in the health sector and with them identified interventions to support critical issues in maternal and child health. This led to us funding and supplying all three

teaching hospitals (Juba, Malakal and Wau) with oxygen concentrators and pulse oximeters. We also provided Juba and Malakal with ultrasound and ultrasound training.

What were your main activities in 2009?

In 2009, while we continued to work with the Ministry of Health to design an innovative community based approach to maternal, newborn and child health, we focused our implementation efforts on the 3 teaching hospitals. We:

- trained, and the GOSS MOH certified, 146 health care providers and their trainers in newborn resuscitation and supplied teaching tools such as mannequins.
- created and deployed an evidence-based newborn resuscitation card in Arabic and English
- provided health worker in-service training
- helped to develop clinical pathways in acute respirator and acute diarrheal illness.

Did you accomplish anything else in 2009?

Yes, after Dr Eluzai Hakim had introduced me/us to Professor Abate, the Vice Chancellor, and working primarily through Dr. Bona (the Dean) and Dr. Kimo (VC office), we began supporting the Juba University College of Medicine by sending instructors in preclinical sciences and supplying educational resources.

Can you expand on how you gave this support?

In 2010 we provided the University of Juba Medical School with:

- over 1,500 hours of teaching using instructors from Harvard Medical School, Johns Hopkins Medical School, Albany Medical College, Tufts Medical School, and the University of Nairobi Medical School – all working under our MGH/Harvard umbrella.
- 350 medical textbooks and other training materials including projectors, copiers, computers, teaching



Figure 2. Dr Burke and other members of the MGH/Harvard team with some of the medical students in 2011.

microscopes, and stethoscopes.

Then, under the guidance of the Dean, we helped to update the curriculum.

Is this teaching continuing in 2011?

It is. With support from the office of the Vice President and great collaboration across the spectrum, we have taught preclinical sciences during March, April, and up until May 10th. Although the medical school is now temporarily closed we will soon begin a primary care teaching service.

Have you continued to support the development of maternal and child health services?

Yes, in 2010, a grant from the MOH helped to implement the Maternal, Newborn and Child Survival (MNCS) Program. In 2010 we developed a best evidence training program, training materials, and began training trainers in Eastern Equatoria. This year (2011) we have:

- trained and outfitted 74 Master Trainers in MNCS and by the end of June we will have trained and supplied 700 front line health workers in MNCS in 7 States
- created a 2-year plan to roll out MNCS to a total of 2,500 front line health workers.

Dr Burke—you and your colleagues have accomplished

a great deal in a short time. How are these activities supported and funded?

As well as the GOSS, our most important supporters are the Massachusetts General Hospital, the Ujenzi Charitable Trust, ([see www.ujenzi.org](http://www.ujenzi.org)), the US Medical Schools involved, and other private donors, corporations, and charitable foundations.

Lastly, how would you like to see the Medical Schools in South Sudan develop? What outside support do they need? Can what you helped to establish in Juba be generalized to the other medical schools in the South Sudan?

These indeed are critical questions; ones that we have tried to answer by completing a formal and rigorous assessment of the medical education training capacity in all of South Sudan. As directed by Dr. Abdi, the in-country WHO Director, we undertook a formal assessment of medical education infrastructure, educators, and students in February of 2011. The recommendations that emerged from that assessment are that given the severe lack of infrastructure and the severe shortage of instructors, establishing and supporting one quality medical school ought to be the initial priority of the country. We do believe that our innovative partnership and approach could certainly be expanded once Independence has been obtained.