

Historical overview of the hospital

The topic of my speech is “Historical overview of the Hospital”. Please, don’t think on hearing the word “historical” or “history” of dusty history books in a dusty school library, when you had to memorize dates of wars and names of politicians.

No, this history is completely different, because it is our own history. The making of St. Martin de Porres Hospital and all people involved in it – of the past and of the present. For me this history is a hi-story of flesh and blood and more fascinating than a final foot-ball play of the World Cup on television.

When we celebrated our St. Martin de Porres Feast last November, I celebrated at the same time my 30 years working in Eikwe. So many things came to my mind.... Yes, it is my story in this hospital, which is also yours, that means our story.

Let’s start from the very beginning:

1957 the Republic of Ghana was born out of the Gold Coast.

1959 – only two years later –the hospital was born out of an orphanage. Because of this we could say, that the hospital is the younger sister of Ghana. Of course – such a comparison can only come into the mind of a gynaecologist and obstetrician like me.

Already 1931 French sisters from the congregation “The Little Servants of Sacred Heart” had come to Nzema land to found an orphanage for BULU children. At the same time Dutch fathers from the Society of Missionaries of Africa (SMA) founded a parish in Eikwe. After some years of tedious and difficult work in complete isolation (there was no bridge yet over the Amanzule river) the fathers wanted to move to Bonyere. But the sisters didn’t agree and the case was brought before the bishop. The bishop decided in favour of the sisters and the fathers had to stay. That meant that also the future hospital would be built in Eikwe and not in Bonyere ! The French sisters stayed in Eikwe till 1959. They had to close down the orphanage because of lack of BULU children. They had done a tremendous work for the love of Christ. Nobody knows how much they suffered in this lonely place. But God will reward them.

On the other hand, there was a dire need for a hospital. People died like flies in this remote rural area because there was no medical help. Under the guidance of Fr. Severin the communities of Eikwe, Ngalekpole and Ngalekyi constructed the first hospital buildings. In the meantime the bishop had asked the Medical Mission Institute in Würzburg, Germany for a doctor and sisters. In 1959 Dr. Heiermann, the first mission doctor arrived with his young wife. They are still alive and I meet them regularly when on home leave. Listen, what he told me of their arrival in Eikwe: “It was a very hot day in August. About one km before Eikwe our car was waved down. Three chiefs with the elders – all in full regalia - greeted us. A brass band played. People were lining the narrow road, singing and dancing. Under a huge state umbrella we walked slowly to the town- like a

president on a red carpet! It was a marvellous reception!” But you must know that Mrs. H. was 8 months pregnant (they had to wait for the visa 5 months!) And it was her first pregnancy. There was no light and running water, the theatre was not installed yet. But the doctor trusted God and his wife delivered smoothly – not only one baby, but twins! Dr.H. also told me how he operated. There was no theatre lamp yet. But four young women with kerosene lamps on the head. When it was a difficult operation during night, his friend Rev Fr. Moshia was chased out of bed to let his Coleman lamp shine brightly into the operation site. Yes, these were really pioneer days! Then the hospital developed quickly.

In October 1959 a bore hole was drilled and it gave plenty of clear water.

1961 – two generators gave light to the hospital and to the mission.

1962 - OPD, a new theatre, laboratory, labour room, main ward and maternity ward were constructed.

What about staff? Since the beginning of 1959 our community “Medical Mission Helpers” from Würzburg, Germany sent over the years 26 sisters to Eikwe. Unfortunately many of them became ill in this unhealthy climate and very difficult working conditions. Most of them could only stay a few years in Eikwe. The sister of the first hour was Sr. Thea (she had come two months before the doctor). She was at the same time tutor, matron and administrator. Some months later tutor sister Magdalena and Sr. Karoline joined her. Soon a lot of young women from Eikwe and surroundings were working in the hospital. After some years the treatment in government hospitals became free of charge. The mission hospitals which were not yet subsidized had to ask a small fee. To pay the salaries and to buy drugs. One day the Omanhene from Atuabo paid a visit to Sr.Thea. He demanded from her free treatment for all patients. Or to close the hospital and go home. Sr.Thea stayed firm and despite of the omanhene’s threats the work in the hospital and the training of staff continued. In 1975 our general superior paid a visit to Eikwe. At that time Ghana underwent a severe economic crisis because of corrupt politicians. Our superior worried about her overworked and malnourished sisters. She asked them to come home. At that time the first EN nurses worked in the hospital and a lot of staff had been sent for further training. The sisters convinced our general superior that they had to stay for keeping up the hospital and the work continued. What do you think when hearing about these events? Three times the sisters, whether French or German, were asked to leave because the situation was too difficult. It was almost like the three temptations of Jesus. 3 times the sisters resisted because of the love of Christ and love of people. Please clap for these courageous and dedicated sisters of the past!

And what about our own history, of the staff working here now? Don’t worry, we still experienced pioneer times. Most of the senior staff started work in the hospital when Ghana – to use a popular expression – was “in the soup”. There was political uneasiness and then one coup after the other. (it was the dark time 1979 till 1985) The shops were empty, there was nothing in the market and

people were starving. I would like to tell you two stories (I could tell you many more), which we shall always remember. In 1980 we experienced a very heavy rainy season. The sky opened like Noah's flood and the hospital was by high waters completely cut off. Patients could reach us either by canoe or by being carried along the beach. After some weeks we had no more supplies. We had gone (of course walking along the beach) to Takoradi. We had asked the Regional Medical Director for an air lift. But he was not sure whether he could arrange a helicopter for us. Thus we were on the point of closing the hospital when - on a beautiful morning - we heard the noise of a helicopter. It came near and nearer and the helicopter landed in front of the church. Whole Eikwe was running. The very friendly pilot greeted us and showed us our treasures: sixty parcels with medicine from the post office, 500 temperature charts and a drum with gas oil and kerosene. The pilot was just like an angel and since that time I know that the colour of angels is black! But the big surprise came, when the pilot started the engine. Nobody knew that helicopter wings exert so much pressure. All of a sudden a sand storm broke out. The temperature charts flew like hundreds of white birds through the air and we all got a handful of sand into our face. The people started screaming and took refuge in the church. Hmm. – a new way to fill an empty church, it is my advice to Rev. fathers! By the way the helicopter came for many weeks. Later on the pilot landed on the hospital grounds and towels and mattresses which were outside for drying landed in the palm trees!

One year later, Ghana suffered from an acute shortage of gas oil, petrol, kerosene and gas. The petrol stations had only a scanty supply and everybody will remember the long lines of waiting cars. There was no gas oil for our generator, that meant no more operations. The little bit we still had was used for emergency operations. One day, one of our sisters cracked a joke in the OPD, "What about asking the patients who want to be operated for gas oil or kerosene or petrol? Let us say two gallons for hernias and 5 gallons for hysterectomies?" A staff member over heard our conversation, took it serious and the news spread like wild fire. On the next OPD day we couldn't believe our eyes. In front of my office stood a long line of patients with small and big containers. There was a strong smell of kerosene and gas oil in the air! From that time on I used on OPD days to count the containers to know how many major and minor operations I had to do. Ghanaians are magicians. We never asked where they got their supplies from. Perhaps they smuggled them over the near by boarder or We hoped they didn't pinch from petrol stations!

Let's go back to the building programme of the hospital.

1977 – a child welfare clinic

1982 -84 staff quarters and a central pharmacy were constructed.

1989 – 91 further staff quarters, emergency block, administration block, isolation ward and a water tower were constructed.

1999 a blood bank, a bio laboratory, and x-ray and scan department, further staff bungalows, a second children's and maternity ward were constructed.

2008 a bore hole for use by patients' relatives was drilled and a new laundry constructed.

We also got help from the government:

1984 the international road and the bridge over the Ankobra river were completed.

1997 the hospital was connected to the national grid.

The ministry of health helped a lot with hospital equipment and payment of salaries. Out of 205 staff members, 134 are mechanised.

The government appreciated our work.

2002 we were the best hospital for Tb treatment in the Western Region.

2004 we were the best hospital in the Western Region.

What about staff? At first I would like to mention the doctors. Between 1959 and 1978 (about 20 years) only 5 doctors were working in the hospital each one about 2- 4 years. For long stretches the hospital was without doctor. Only from 1978 on doctors were permanently in Eikwe. Up till now 14 doctors had worked a long term of 1 - 2 - 8 - 10 - 30 years. In addition we got 12 short term doctors who worked 1 – 3 months.

I would like to mention particularly the doctor couple Dr. Paul Cooper and his wife Dr. Iparkhan Kassimova from Kazakhstan. Dr. Cooper was just rewarded for his 10 years' stay in Eikwe. Dr. Iparkhan joined us 8 years ago. For a young couple with two small children, it is not easy to stay in such a far away place. They miss their families and friends. There are no facilities like a green park for a stroll with the children. No nice restaurant where they can have lunch on a Sunday etc. Both doctors are very dedicated to their work. Please give a special clap for them. On Dr. Cooper's initiative the AVT programme was started 2 years ago and for this he and his co-workers from PHC deserve another clap!

What about the rest of the staff? Most of the senior personnel started work about the same time as we sisters or shortly afterwards. Most of you were teenagers at that time. You were scattered in the whole hospital, scrutinised and trained for a year or more. Then you were sent out for special training and again you were scattered in whole Ghana or even in foreign countries.

Dr. Cooper was sent to Würzburg, Germany. The administrator Mr. John Abakah to Oxford, England and Sr. Comfort to Lead, England. In Ghana Eikwe staff could be found every where: in Akwatia, Bawku, Jirapa, Berekum, Maase Ofinso, Kintampo, Atibi, Nkwawkwaw, Esiama, Komfo Anokyi (Kumasi) and Korle-bu teaching hospital (Accra). You all came back and the hospital collected you like a hen gathers her chicks. Very rarely a staff member went to another place. You started work here, got married, founded a family, got children, and built your houses. New Eikwe is the staff's town. During all these 50 years staff members also died. We wept together, buried them and took part in their funerals. The last staff – who died an untimely death was Mr. Nicholas Amgborme whom I want to name for all other 38 staff members, who died. May they rest in peace. Let's stand up and bow our heads.

I would like to talk a bit about our "blue ladies", the ward assistants who were trained locally. They are one of the strong pillars carrying the hospital. Without them no doctor, no nurse, no midwife could do the work they are doing now. The same concerns the other staff members whether theatre staff, electricians, laundry staff etc. It reminds me of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians : "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you". And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you". Now you are a body of Christ and each one a part of it." Yes, the hospital is like a body, a living organism where every body needs the others. We can only work as a team.

The 50 years 'Jubilee is for all of us a time for reflection. To stand still and look back. Almost all of us spent the best years of our lives in the hospital. Was and is it still worth while to work here? Yes, and once more yes. We should know that we are privileged. That God gave us the gifts, strength and the perseverance to heal thousands of people. Or to relieve the pain or to comfort them or to help them to survive. We shall never know how many children would have lost their mother or how many parents their children etc. without our help. Only God knows and He will reward you.

Last not least the Ghanaian and Indian sisters. You read in the small jubilee calendar that the Infant Jesus sisters from Cape Coast arrived on 1st of March 1995 to render their service to Eikwe hospital. On 20th of July 2006, sisters from Society of Sisters of St. Anne, Chennai from the far away India started work here. We are all very happy to have them with us. With them and trust in God we look into the future and say with our patron St. Martin de Porres : "to be all for all" for the love of Christ and the glory of God.