

Link Letter No.46 December 2009

**Dear friends,**

**Drazi**

On arriving back in Aru in September, the first thing I did was to visit one of my midwives, Drazi, who was seriously ill in hospital with cancer. I have spoken about Drazi in these letters on several occasions – she lost a son in his early twenties to tetanus a couple of years ago following an accident which left him paralysed from the waist down, and another teenage son had died of a malignancy a few years earlier.

Drazi had been intermittently ill for several years and before I went home last May, knowing that her illness was progressing, I made a visit to see her. It was a poignant visit and I was so pleased that she was still conscious and lucid, and we had what turned out to be a final very special conversation. We were both able to say what we wanted to the other and we sang and prayed together. The next day she slipped into a coma and died a few days afterwards.

The respect folk had for her was evident by the number who turned up for her funeral service; you'd have thought that she was a very eminent person, instead of a humble midwife who lived simply but who was always willing to help others and noted for her wisdom and integrity. We all miss her calm presence in our maternity and although we have other very

**Drazi**



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capable midwives I know that the women miss seeing her there. I miss her also as a good friend who I would often seek out for advice if we had a delicate or difficult situation at the health centre.

She left five children including her youngest daughter, Anjoyo, who is just finishing her last year at school. We hope that she will follow in her mother's footsteps and become a nurse/midwife. Drazi was the breadwinner of her family and, indeed, since she died her husband has returned to his home village and left the children to fend for themselves. It will be hard for them all. The fact that my first "consultation" on my return ended up being with Drazi, and was very much a palliative care consultation, was somehow particularly special and felt like confirmation to me that I am on the right road doing my distance learning palliative medicine diploma.

**Diploma**

On the subject of my diploma, I am very much enjoying the course with all its reading matter – although the time it takes to download everything can test my patience at times. The biggest hurdles I have had to jump over so far seemed to have been technical ones relating either to our Internet service or accessing the on-line facilities at Cardiff.

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Indeed, when I sent in my first assignment, I had had so many problems with firstly trying to access the on-line library facilities to do the work required and then secondly trying to just get it to "send", that when it did eventually go I felt so relieved! It felt like I had submitted a PhD thesis rather than just one small assignment!

### **Catching up**

It has been good to catch up with what has been going on here work wise in my absence and visit several of my health centres. As usual, there are both some encouragements and some challenges. Mahagi Hospital is doing well, and although the in-patient building is not finished we have started to use some of the rooms – as bed space was desperately needed. We now have both a doctor and a nurse-surgeon working there who have started to do some operations. We have just interviewed for a hospital administrator; we were hoping for someone experienced but all the candidates were young newly qualified administrators and so we have appointed someone for a three-month period to see how she fares.

### **A delicate balancing act**

At our newest health centre, Oboni, we are pleased to have recently appointed an experienced qualified midwife to work alongside our qualified nurse. Before we took over the running of this health centre, it was a health post manned by unqualified folk. Some of these still work at the health centre, and we are pleased to have them as they are respected members of their local community, but it is sometimes a delicate matter to help them to adopt some more medically acceptable practices. We don't want them to feel threatened or undermined in their work, but, on the other hand, we do want to insist that our medical care reaches certain minimum acceptable standards. It feels like one is walking a delicate tightrope at times.

### **Fear of being abandoned**

Every year we see an increase in the number of folk who come forward for voluntary HIV testing and counselling, some of them travelling for several days to reach our centre. A year or so ago we started a programme for the prevention of transmission of HIV from mother to child and we have been encouraged by the number of pregnant women who come forward to be tested at our antenatal clinics. It is often particularly hard for these women who are found to be HIV positive, as they are reluctant to tell their husbands for fear they will be abandoned. Indeed that happened last week

with a lady; when she came to give birth, her husband disappeared – telling her that she was now on her own with the baby. We recently had another lady who, on being told she was HIV positive, said that she would not tell her husband until after the baby was born, as she feared he would leave her. Of course husbands may well be HIV positive as well, but not many of them come forward to be tested. It is hard to know whether that is a deliberate decision on their part or whether their wives have not had the courage to tell them that they are positive. It is so hard when you risk being abandoned, and life for a woman on her own is very tough.

### **On the maternity front...**

My cat Pips has just had another kitten – this time only one instead of the normal 3-5 kittens. Pips herself has an interesting colouring of grey/pinky-ginger/white and for the first time has had a tortoiseshell baby. I also seemed to have ended up rearing chickens against my better judgment. Over the years I have from time to time been given chickens but I have never tried to rear them. I was given a chicken a couple of months before I came home in May, who then had 10 chicks just before I left. I returned to find that the original mother had died whilst sitting on her next lot of eggs – we suspect that she was bitten by a snake, but out of the 10 original babies, eight were now adult – four females and females males.

One of the females has not laid eggs, she is blind in one eye and smaller than the others and often gets chased away when food is around; I feel sorry for her and try to slip her a bit of extra food on the side without the others noticing. Of the other three females, one has six chicks and the other two, who sat on their eggs together, have seven chicks between them. It's quite amusing because the two mothers go around together with their brood and it doesn't seem as if they know who's chick is whose, or at least the chicks don't seem to know who their mother is! A couple of weeks ago we decided to kill one of the males for lunch; when someone went to find one they had all disappeared. As we sat eating lunch we saw them all gradually coming back – it is as if they knew that the danger was over and coast was now clear!

As always, thank you so much for all your support, love, prayers and concern and especially to those who have sent notes of encouragement concerning my studies, I have particularly appreciated those. I hope that this letter will arrive in time to wish you all a joyful and peaceful Christmas and God's richest blessing for 2010.

With love from

*Francesca*

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