

Malcolm Chalk



In the run up to International Nurses' Day (12th May), we speak to Malcolm Chalk, one of our brave nurses at Weston General Hospital who has been awarded a medal for service to those suffering from the Ebola Virus in Sierra Leone.

Ebola has claimed an estimated 11,000 lives during the current epidemic, making it the largest outbreak since the virus was discovered 40 years ago.

Following his medal, Malcolm, a nursing practitioner at the hospital, also made the list of the '50 most inspirational Bristolians alive today'.

What made you want to travel to Sierra Leone at the height of the Ebola crisis?

It is something I have always wanted to do, to be involved with some kind of humanitarian work. I've had the idea for a long time to help people less fortunate than us here in the West.

At first I volunteered to go to the Gaza Strip during the bombing of that area in 2014, at the same time the Ebola epidemic was turning critical and I was asked 'if I would I be prepared to deploy to West Africa' and I accepted.

Most of the deployment arrangements were made by The Department for International Development (DFID).

Were you worried about potentially contracting the virus?

I was worried! Ebola is a horrific disease, I was apprehensive especially the week before the deployment, however when we got there and started working at the Kerry Town Ebola Treatment Centre, it was surprising how complacent some of us became and we had to remind ourselves of the dangerous situation we were all in.

What training did you receive and, once out there, and what did your work in Africa involve?

I received a week of training in the UK before flying out to Africa with my colleagues; we were the second deployment and there were around 28 of us.

Once I was out there we all received some more training, for example, around how to wear the protective clothing, before eventually treating and nursing patients at the Ebola treatment centre (ETC).

Part of our tasks, besides treating patients, was to work with the Sierra Leonean (SL) 'Ministry of Health' nurses and Cuban nurses and doctors. We worked in teams and provided training sessions for the Sierra Leoneans.

I also provided a service for the workers at Kerry Town as a primary care nurse with one of the qualified Sierra Leonean nurses, Mary, an excellent nurse, who told me her brother had been murdered in the civil war.

We treated people of all ages, adults, children and grandparents - sometimes whole families. Some were very unwell and unfortunately died. The survival rate was only around 53%, but British and NHS involvement fortunately raised this level.

It was amazing to see some of those that had been so poorly survive. I admitted a young woman, aged about 27, and she was very unwell with the virus; however just before I went back to the UK she was up and dancing, saying she was well and going home to see her children - she was discharged the following day

How proud were you proud to receive a medal for your work?

It was a great gesture and recognition of our work to receive the Ebola medal. I'm the first person in my family to receive a medal, since my granddads, who were awarded medals for service during World War One.

I recently wrote an article on the 'psychological effects of working at an Ebola Treatment Centre' which was published in the British Journal of Nursing (BJN). It is based on a small extract from the journal I kept in Africa, and I'm grateful the BJN has published the account.

What do you think about making a list of the '50 most inspirational Bristolians alive today'? (Originally published in the Bristol Post)

It was a really nice to be included in the list – however, it was also a little embarrassing as I'm not actually from Bristol, I'm originally from Abbots Langley, just north of London, but again it is a very nice gesture and I certainly feel accepted as a local; I love Bristol and my son is a Bristolian!

Switching gears, how important is International Nurses' Day to you?

I think it's incredibly important to recognise the effort of nurses from all around the world, and I'm pleased that International Nurses' Day does that.

At Weston we have a number of nurses from Europe and around the world who work here and I think we're a great example of people coming from different backgrounds and cultures and working incredibly well together – drawing on new experiences and approaches.

I've also seen first-hand the dedication of international nurses. When I was working in Africa a lot of nurses at the local hospital in Sierra Leone died because they just didn't have the equipment to protect themselves – the commitment and sacrifice they showed for their own people was incredible to witness.

And yet, it's bittersweet that I received recognition for my work, whilst many of them might be forgotten; but I will never forget them, their names and hard work.

International Nurses' Day is an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the incredible dedication of nurses' around the world - including those who ultimately gave their lives for their profession as many Sierra Leoneans did.

Malcolm Chalk is a nursing practitioner at Weston Area Health NHS Trust.

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