

# Beyond Borders

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

*"I arrived in Bam the night of the earthquake. I felt like the world was coming to an end. All that was left of the city was a pile of stones." – Dr Eric Vanhalewyn, a doctor on his first mission in Bam, Iran.*

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), or *Doctors Without Borders*, held its first recruitment talk in Singapore, at the Health Promotion Board's Auditorium, on 22 and 23 April 2004. Addressing a rapt audience, speakers Ms June Kashio and Dr Wong Ting Hway offered valuable insight into the history, vision and tireless commitment of MSF – a group first formed in 1971 by a handful of doctors and journalists attached to the International Red Cross in Nigeria. In the three decades since its inception, MSF has made great progress, and now runs 18 offices around the world, with 3,000 recruits joining its 450 global projects every year. The organisation also garnered a Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 for its altruistic efforts, which included treatment of war injuries in Haiti and Liberia, nutrition and vaccination programmes in Africa, as well as assistance to refugees in Kosovo.

Dr Wong's presentation on her stint in Angola was a humorous and eye-opening experience, as she related difficulties encountered – from primitive neonatal care, doing ward rounds kneeling on the ground, and inventing creative methods of getting the locals to take the prescribed medications, to constant fears about security, and losing life and limb in mine-infested areas.

*"Life has been hectic and the political situation is like a roller coaster. There were times when we had to pack a small bag*



• (L-R) Ms Chua Suan Ngoh, Dr Wong Ting Hway, Mr Willem van Lippen, Ms June Kashio.

*in case for emergency evacuation. There are still many lootings and gun-shootings..." – Ms Chua Suan Ngoh, a Singaporean nurse who recently returned from Liberia.*

The talk closed with some sobering facts. Although "life on a mission" may strike some as glamorous and exciting, in truth, it is fraught with uncertainties and obstacles which will test one's resilience many times over. However, it is obvious that numerous others share MSF's vision, as evidenced by the continuous flow of enthusiastic and dedicated applicants year after year. With doctors and paramedical personnel from different continents successfully working together in spite of the dangers and stresses involved, *Doctors Without Borders* admirably lives up to its name.

***(The MSF team would like to extend its heartfelt appreciation to the Singapore Medical Council and Singapore Medical Association for their invaluable support. Please note that Mr Willem van Lippen will succeed Ms Kashio as the Hong Kong office's Human Resources Manager starting 24 May 2004. Enquiries can be sent via email to [volunteering@msf.org.hk](mailto:volunteering@msf.org.hk))***

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JUNE KASHIO

### 1. What is your position in MSF?

I'm currently the Human Resources Manager for MSF Hong Kong, and responsible for recruiting field aid workers from medical, paramedical and non-medical professions in Hong Kong, Greater China and Southeast Asia.

### 2. What does MSF hope to achieve on its first visit to Singapore?

We are here to let more Singaporeans know who we are, what we do and what we stand for. Two of our Singaporean volunteers – Dr Wong Ting Hway (Angola) and Chua Suan Ngoh (Liberia) – have shared their field experiences through pictures and stories, and offered their thoughts, reflections and advice to potential applicants. This was well-received, and hopefully, inspired many others to follow in their footsteps.

### 3. How has the response been, especially since this is the first MSF talk held here?

We received over 100 participants at the talks, mainly from the medical profession, including surgeons, doctors and nurses. We had the opportunity to interview some candidates, and have recruited two medical doctors and one nurse from Singapore.

### 4. What is the spectrum of doctor applicants like?

We meet young, motivated doctors who have prepared themselves since medical school to go out with MSF, after obtaining the prerequisite two years of professional experience. We have specialists who we need most, in surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, public health and infectious diseases. There is no age limit as long as one is fit and healthy. Sometimes, we even recruit retired medics and paramedics.

### 5. What does the MSF look for specifically in its doctor applicants?

The commitment and flexibility to be available for 6 to 12 months per field assignment. Training or experience in infectious diseases is a strong preference. Someone who is a strong team player or team leader, or has previous overseas exposure, ideally with other NGOs in developing countries or through travel.

### 6. Are there any current high-profile projects in Asia or other parts of the world?

We work with populations who have little or no access to basic healthcare. We run feeding centres as part of our nutritional programmes in Angola and Liberia. We also focus on marginalised and often forgotten populations such as ethnic minorities and



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women. HIV/ AIDS remains a priority in places where treatment is too expensive for many to afford and access. Currently, we run prevention and treatment projects for malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/ AIDS, in Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand.

**7. Does MSF have any pet projects?**

We do not take particular interest in a certain type of crisis. However, we do have some large relief operations in areas where needs are enormous, and yet humanitarian aid is lacking. For instance, since the end of 2003, an ongoing violent war in Darfur, West Sudan, has driven many Sudanese to seek refuge in Chad, and become internally displaced in other parts of Sudan. There is an urgent need for more assistance, specifically for medical aid and surgery, food, water and shelter, but it is a forgotten crisis that has not received much media attention. Nearly 40 MSF volunteers and hundreds of Sudanese are providing assistance to 250,000 displaced people in Darfur. But, in certain regions in Darfur, we are the only operational NGO.

**8. Do you think doctors in Singapore have anything unique/extra to offer MSF?**

At present, we have recruited a total of six Singaporeans, and five have been sent to the field. Singapore is an international city that offers first class services by top quality professionals. The ethnic diversity here also makes it unique and favourable for an international organisation like MSF, which looks for candidates who are open-minded, culturally sensitive and willing to work and live as a team in multi-cultural settings.

**9. For those who are interested but undecided about joining, do you have any words of encouragement to help them take that first step forward?**

MSF is a place for challenges, life-changing experiences, and opportunities to meet people from all walks of life. No matter what profession, rank or status one may have back home, ultimately it is about respect for fellow human beings and working towards a common goal. It is a place where you can discover and learn more about yourself, appreciate and value life more. Going out with MSF is a choice and there is no right or wrong answer. It is about being ready and committed. Remember, life is short and you only live it once! ■