



A young landmine victim



The victim of a 'small scale' attack (bullet wound)



The snake baby

Photos taken by Wei Cheng

Wei Cheng and his wife Karin Moorhouse fulfilled a promise they made as university students: to volunteer for Médecins Sans Frontières (無國界醫生 or MSF), leaving their jobs as Assistant Professor of Paediatric Surgery at Queen Mary Hospital, and senior marketing executive at Nestlé, to work in war-torn Kuito, Angola. It was five years ago, but the memories are still fresh.

'Amputations are tough, even for the most jaded surgeon, and I vividly remember my own initiation: the nauseating sound of the Gigli saw, followed by a perfunctory thud as the amputated limb fell into the scrap bucket. Landmines are indiscriminate and unforgiving, permanently altering the lives of hundreds of men, women and children. Angola was the world's most heavily mined country, where one in 400 people is an amputee, and Kuito was the world's most heavily mined city.

With war so prevalent in today's news, it is difficult to envisage the true impact of that word: "war". Before Kuito, I had never really fathomed the impediments to development, nor the simple realities of daily life for the affected. In Angola, life for the majority was pushed back to the Stone Age. The population was left largely to their own devices to eke out an existence in miserable conditions. There was no electricity, no running water—in fact nothing of the life I had so readily taken for granted. The health system had completely collapsed, and only a fraction of the population could reach basic care. And by then it was often too late, as most patients presented with very advanced pathologies. Poor sanitation and poor nutrition compounded the situation. The end result was infectious diseases and above all, abscesses. Abscesses were our most common pathology. We treated nearly 40 cases very month.

Our patients were also exposed to diseases such as malaria, typhoid, cholera, measles, intestinal parasites, to say nothing of the omnipresent risks of TB and AIDS. I encountered conditions I had only read about in medical textbooks: things like Pellagra, and gas gangrene. In the operating theatre we had little more than the most basic instruments, forcing me to hone my clinical skills like never before.

The snake baby

We have many stories but this one left an indelible mark on our lives.

On the first day of Chinese New Year—the Year of the Snake—I started my operation list as usual. Then Emilie, the midwife, advised she was transferring a patient who was bleeding following a delivery. She was in shock so we rushed to prepare. On arrival, the patient was bathed in blood, and looked weak and pallid. She was bleeding inside so I immediately operated on her. Her uterus had ruptured during delivery leading to profuse bleeding and already I sensed her life was slipping away. I put my fingers on her aorta. There was no pulse.

At two o'clock that morning, the 30-year-old mother had given birth to a little girl—"The Snake Baby". She was probably one of the first babies born on Chinese New Year's day. This alone is cause for celebration. The baby was her seventh child. Yet when Emilie came to work first thing this morning, she found the mother lying in a pool of blood. In the dark of the night, without electricity, the maternity staff simply had not noticed the bleeding. For more than 7 hours, blood leaked into the baby's swaddling cloth.

Distraught by the loss of life on my operating table, I turned and walked out of the theatre, tearing my gloves from my clammy hands. Emilie stood there cuddling the cutest baby girl in her arms and she sobbed when I told her that we had lost the mother.

I took the baby and held her gently in my arms. At that moment, I started to drown in her beauty. The morning sunshine streamed across her tiny face. She frowned and looked up at the world with one eye. She lifted her little right hand, spread her tiny fingers and pushed her index finger against her forehead, as if pondering the moment. Did she realise that her mother had died, just 8 hours after she came to the world? I held her and was lost in thought: had she been born in another part of the world, her fate would be different.'

WEI CHENG

Wei Cheng is currently an Associate Professor of Paediatric Surgery at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. After Angola, he volunteered again for MSF and went to Liberia during that country's civil war. He and Karin Moorhouse have written a book about their experiences in Angola: 'No One Can Stop the Rain' published by Insomniac Press, Toronto (ISBN: 1-894663-90-X) and available in Chinese as "來自圍城的家書" (ISBN: 962-8326-69-4) published by Step Forward Publishing, Hong Kong. All book royalties go to MSF.