

Education and training at Buduburam Refugee Settlement

“Is that you, Dr. Ammann?”

The young woman stood beside the newborn baby, poised to administer a life-saving dose of Nevirapine to the infant. As the Global Strategies for HIV Prevention team stepped into the room at St. Joseph’s Catholic Hospital in Liberia, there was a look of recognition and pleasant surprise in her eyes. It took only a moment to recognize her as Edith, a counselor trained by Global Strategies for HIV Prevention six years before at the Buduburam Refugee Settlement in Ghana.

Buduburam was opened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1990 during the Liberian Civil Wars, which sent thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. Buduburam has been inhabited by nearly 40,000 refugees, who are subject to extremely close living quarters and exposed to numerous diseases. Yet, until 2005 when Global Strategies for HIV Prevention stepped in, there had never been any training on HIV prevention or treatment in the settlement.

Global Strategies for HIV Prevention was brought to Buduburam by Cori Stern, a reporter who had previously visited the settlement and met a charismatic young man named Reuben B. Gboweh. A refugee himself, Reuben was working to organize training for health care workers at the settlement. Cori had identified Reuben as a leader amongst people in desperate need of HIV prevention and treatment, and with his assistance, we agreed to conduct a training workshop at the refugee settlement.

Over four days, doctors trained upwards of 60 people. The attendees included representatives from the medical community such as Edith, a counselor at the Buduburam clinic, who had never received any training on HIV prevention and treatment. The workshop focused on dispelling the mythology surrounding HIV, teaching proper prevention techniques, and demonstrating basic PMTCT treatment such as the administration of Nevirapine.

It is almost a given that, upon completing a workshop, we are not immediately aware of the impact of our work. In the case of Buduburam, it was not until we visited the Clinton Foundation in Liberia in 2009 that we received the first evidence that our efforts had been highly effective. In the middle of the visit to the foundation, I heard someone excitedly shouting my name. I turned to see a young man racing down the hall towards me. It was Reuben Gboweh, who was now employed by Liberia’s National AIDS Commission.

The training he received from Global Strategies for HIV Prevention helped him eventually find work in Liberia, a country facing nearly 90% unemployment.

This past spring, we traveled to Liberia on a routine site visit and ran into more familiar faces from the Buduburam Refugee Settlement. First, we visited the Strongheart Fellowship Program which educates

and mentors vulnerable youth in Liberia. The program was established by Cori Stern who initially led us to Buduburam.

Next, was Clara Mvogo, a consultant we had met in Buduburam who had worked on a health and quality assurance program in Ghana. She is the President of Sinkor Rotary Club which is collaborating on a 2012 HIV prevention workshop in Liberia.

Finally, while taking our team around St. Joseph's Catholic Hospital, Dr. Lily Sanvee opened the door to the post-labor ward to reveal Edith, administering the antiretroviral medication to a newborn baby, just as she had been taught at Buduburam, six years prior.

In the face of something as large as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, and it is sometimes difficult to recognize when we are able to make an impact. But in these chance encounters with attendees from the Buduburam workshop, our team witnessed valuable, tangible evidence that the training we administered was effective and is being carried on even after departure.

Global Strategies for HIV Prevention focuses on education and training intentionally. In addition to saving the lives of countless HIV-infected women and their children, training provides skills and therefore jobs, to people who desperately need them. Global Strategies for HIV Prevention cannot stay in African countries forever, but we can teach committed local individuals who live in their home countries and continue changing lives every day.

It is well within our power to take action which seems small at first, but in fact has significant influence. Our actions spread and extend very far, reaching out with many arms to touch and save countless lives.

Thank you.

Arthur Ammann M.D.