

Okhaldhunga Anniversary

Dear Friends,

Thank you for the opportunity I have to be with you in spirit if not in body, and sharing in these celebrations.

It is hard to recollect how different life was when I first came to Okhaldhunga – no running water, just kerosene tins carried from the nearest stream – no communications except for a series of postmen (dak wallas) running each a day's journey between Okhaldhunga and Kathmandu carrying one lot of letters out and returning with another lot of letters back, between two posts in a series of ten posts (daks). Wood was shaped with a wood chipper (an adze) rather than cut with a saw. Cement was very expensive, so walls were built with blocks of stone bonded with mud and dung – milk and meat came direct from the buffalo.

For my part now, I have difficulty in realising how modern Okhaldhunga is now with modern buildings and roads and crops in the fields and education and emails and radio and many other things besides. What has not changed is the spirit of the people.

Wondering where to begin, one afternoon I walked from the bazaar down a narrow footpath leading to a small valley just a short distance from the town. It looked favourable. There was a small village and a stream close by for a water supply. Land which could be watered was planted with rice. Other land was used for planting maize, millet or buckwheat.

In mid-afternoon there was no one in sight, until one man suddenly appeared and he happened to be the head man (mukhia) of the village. When he heard that I was looking for a house to live in and another in which to start a hospital, he said that he had two empty houses which he could let us have straight away. It turned out that he was Gauharka Rai, a former soldier in the British Gurkhas like his father before him. The reason that he was not abroad with the Gurkhas was that his father had died in a typhoid epidemic the previous year, and he had to return home to take his place as mukhia. These circumstances also encouraged him to be interested in a hospital, unbeknown to me.

In return, I was able to tell him that I had first heard of Okhaldhunga while I was serving as a medical officer to 2/7th Gurkha Rifles in Malaya eleven years previously in 1951. At that time, already intending to be a missionary with the Church of Scotland, I had thought of Okhaldhunga as a place where I might work. It seemed, that afternoon, that something special had happened. We had an almost instant understanding and I went back up the hill a happy man, giving thanks to God, knowing that I had a place for the hospital.

The two nurses, Jill Cook and Miriam Sherpani, who were with me, moved in straight away and were soon seeing patients in the downstairs of one house. Later on I joined them with my family in the second house. The lower half of the nurses' house was used as operating room, outpatients and dispensary according to the



Dhan Pal, one of the early dak wallas



Team photo, about 1962
Anne & Jimmy Dick with two of their children, Miriam (Sherpani) & Hastaman Rai, Jill Cook

need. Soon after, a few bamboo huts were constructed in which inpatients could be cared for.

It worked quite well, and it had to, because a substantial number of very ill patients with operable conditions were carried in from considerable distances round about, there being few other medical facilities within carrying distance. At various times these included Tibetan refugees, some of whom had walked across the Himalayas blind with cataracts and expecting to see again. Another patient, less severely in need, although coming from a full day's walking



The Dick's house, Sobru

distance from Sobru, I immediately recognised as the batman (*rote*) who had served me in Malaya eleven years previously, though neither of us had any knowledge of the other's presence until the instant of meeting. I was able to tell him that I had first heard of Okhaldhunga from him. We had some exchange of experiences after that, but unfortunately a line of patients in waiting made it short and I never saw him again – an example of how much one was forced to be isolated by travel limitations at that time.

From having worked previously in other parts of the Himalaya, I perceived the importance of something that was also a personal inclination – surgery. And the reason was the same again – isolation.

The Rev. Robert Bergsacker and I had trekked through East Nepal in 1958 to decide which place should be chosen for the UMN Application to the Nepal government. I chose Okhaldhunga because it was the most isolated and hence the most needy district centre in East Nepal. Incidentally, this consideration occurs also in my native Scotland where an isolated island needs to be provided with a hospital and a surgeon because it cannot be guaranteed that urgent cases can be transported to the mainland in bad weather conditions.

It all depends on means of transport. Now Okhaldhunga is blessed with a road, but in those days patient transport was done with a hammock suspended from a long pole supported by a strong man at each end – of whom two pairs were required to allow for alternating spells of duty – stressful to the patient and costly in effort and money.

For operations, a system was devised involving epidural anaesthesia, antisepsis by means of drapes and instruments soaked in antiseptic, kerosene lamps and intravenous solution sterilised with a bacterial filter. Surprisingly it worked remarkably well and saved many lives.

I wish to end by praising the succession of doctors and nurses and all the other staff who have followed over these fifty years from many parts of Britain and from many nationalities, and also including the Mennonite boys from the north of the USA – farm boys who were able to do anything asked of them, the Newari carpenters who made the door and window frames, and the strong Tibetans who swung the huge sledge hammers to break the bedrock that had to be removed to level the floors – the hardest task of all.



Patient being carried to the hospital in a hammock slung on poles

I wish also to pay tribute to the Norwegians who are here at present, and their predecessors. Pastor Robert Bergsacker helped by guiding and aiding me in my first journey through East Nepal, and then Odd Hoftun came a few years later to use his engineering expertise to define the site and draw the plans for the first hospital building to replace the initial houses. And now Erik and Kristen Bohler are there, carrying on the good work in the hospital and taking it into the future in this still new century.

And not least, a tribute to the Rais of Sobru and the people of Okhaldhunga who have always given their co-operation and valued support.

My wife and I, along with our family Katie, David, and Ella who was born in Sobru, and who hopefully is with you today, share in your celebrations and send our best wishes.

God bless all of you and what you are doing in His name.

Dr James Dick

Scotland, 2012

