

Jan 22, 2012. Sunday P.6

CHARITY

MEDIC GIVES NEEDY GIFT OF SIGHT ON CONGO TRIP

Local doctor says success of medical missions to Africa has made her family blind to its own comfort

Lo Wei
wei.lo@scmp.com

A family doctor who describes herself as an "ordinary Hong Kong girl" is heading for the heart of Africa on a mission to save the sight of thousands of people.

Dr Joyce Samoutou-Wong, 35, and her husband, eye surgeon Henri Samoutou, 38, will leave their home in the Britain to create the first eye centre offering surgery in the Republic of Congo, after hearing from a missionary doctor about the country's overwhelming need.

"Our hearts are always for Africa," she said. "We found out that Congo had never had an eye centre offering surgery. People do not have to be blind when there are simple measures [available] like a cataract surgery which only costs HK\$625."

"I always wondered: if I were blind, how much would I pay? Would I rob or steal?"

Samoutou-Wong, who grew up in Hong Kong, first worked in neighbouring Gabon in 2000, while she was in the fifth year of her medical course in Britain.

She met her Gabon-born husband during the stay and came away with a profound wish to help the people of the poverty-ravaged continent after being inspired by the work of the American missionary doctors there.

"I was so inspired but at the same time I was so miserable," she said. "I looked at [the doctors] and I looked at myself. I was just a spoiled brat."

But fulfilling her wish to work in Africa was a challenge for Samoutou-Wong, who wrote in her journal seven reasons why she would never and could never launch a mission like the one she will embark on in March.

"I'm not an adventurous person, timid at times," she wrote. "I hate snakes and insects. I'm the only child in the family. Who am I kidding? I'm just an ordinary Hong Kong girl."

But the joy of seeing patients responding to treatment helped her overcome her fears.

One man she treated during a second Gabon trip between 2006 and 2008 particularly inspired her.

He had run his own construction company in the capital, Libreville, until contracting cataracts and losing his sight at the age of 24. In his 30s, he was being cared for by his parents and could not use the toilet unaided.

"You see the joy in their faces," she said. "It's not just their sight being restored, it's their lives."

After surgery, the man said: "I'd forgotten there are colours."

"He then went on describing everything he saw, things that we take for granted," the doctor recalled.

Samoutou-Wong says the new hospital expected to provide 500 operations a year. But it will receive no regular financial support from any organisation. Instead, the family is raising the money - HK\$1.5 million for the first year, HK\$7-8 million to



You see the joy in their faces. It's not just their sight being restored, it's their lives

JOYCE SAMOUTOU-WONG, DOCTOR

cover the next five years. So far, HK\$800,000 has been raised, mostly from friends in Hong Kong.

The couple and their three children will have to grow their own fruit and vegetables for food and will have electricity only two or three times a week. The country's 4.2 million people have a life expectancy of 54 years, one of the worst in the world, and there is only one doctor for every 10,000 people.

But Samoutou-Wong has the answer for those who say she is crazy for giving up her comfortable life and taking her family to live in a country where diarrhoea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever are rife.

"Yes, we are crazy," she said. "However, it is crazier if having seen the need, we do not try to do something about it when we know that we can make a difference."



Joyce Samoutou-Wong, her husband Henri and their children (left); a child from Gabon whom they treated for an eye tumour. Photos: SMP Pictures