

Malaria, snakes and Aids part of a life in the bush



Margaret Hewitt in her sister's Newport garden. 0010-c01201

SUE LUPTON meets an Isle of Wight 'Angel' who dispenses TLC in a remote Zambian hospital



THERE cannot be many places more different from the Isle of Wight than the Central African bush.

Yet Margaret Hewitt, who grew up in the Newport area and still has strong links with the Island, has devoted her life to nursing at a remote bush hospital in Zambia.

Margaret recently travelled back to Britain to receive an MBE from the Queen at Buckingham Palace. She spent six weeks with her sister, Alberta Peck, who lives in Pan Lane, Newport.

Margaret's church, Bethany Evangelical Church in Union Street, Newport, supports her work in Africa.

Kalene Mission Station is situated in a narrow strip of Zambia surrounded by Congo on the north and east sides, and Angola on the west.

It is about 400 miles from the nearest town and in the wet season, the journey by road takes about three days. When Margaret travels back to Britain (usually every four years) she uses the mission station's air service.

"The landscape is bush. We have seven months of rain and five dry months each year." The local people, who belong to the Lunda tribe, are subsistence farmers.

With 180 beds, Kalene Hospital is the biggest mission hospital in Zambia. It is staffed by two doctors, one German and one Belgian, and three mission sisters, including Margaret. There are five trained Zambian nurses and 18 auxiliary nurses.

"Aids and malaria are our biggest problems," Margaret said. "At the moment we are not winning against malaria. It has become resistant to anti-malarials and it is very difficult to treat. If it develops into cerebral malaria, it can be life threatening."

Margaret has to take anti-malaria drugs and sleeps under a mosquito net. "We are trying to get the villagers to use mosquito nets. The mission buys them in bulk and sells them cheaply."

Margaret explained that although Aids was not as prevalent as in the



Margaret Hewitt at work with children in Kalene Hospital

towns, where people were dying every day, it was getting worse at Kalene. Workers like policemen and immigration officials contracted it when they went to the towns and then infected local people on their return.

"We now have 60 Aids orphans in the local community. They get taken into the extended families."

The mission has appointed an Aids officer, Charles Kafweta, a former school headteacher, who is responsible for educating people about Aids and checking on the welfare of Aids orphans.

One of the difficulties is persuading Lunda people not to perform a tribal ritual in which wrists are cut and blood exchanged to divine whether a sick person had been cursed by an enemy. This ritual spreads Aids.

"Fortunately a lot of people are becoming Christians and trusting more in God which means they leave their spirit ways," said Margaret. The Christian converts were also helpful in spreading information about Aids.

Margaret travels frequently from the hospital to outlying villages. Her transport is a 70cc Honda motorcycle, with an IW registration.

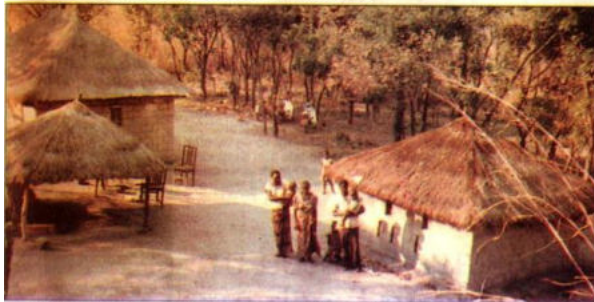
In the early years, elephant and lion were often seen in the area. "At one time a lion was killing the villagers' chickens," Margaret recalled.

"Nowadays, common wildlife includes cockroaches, bedbugs, rats and snakes. "I have heard that while I have been away, my dogs have found a big black mamba on the veranda of my house."

The staple diet of the local people is maize dumpling, eaten with relish made of whatever is available - leaves, meat, fish, caterpillars or rat. Margaret has eaten them all. "If I am out in the villages and it is given to me, I eat it."

Margaret is now 67, and returns to Zambia on Sunday. She plans to retire to the Island in two years' time.

"Being a missionary and nursing in Africa go hand in hand," she said. "I share the Gospel when I am nursing people and I absolutely love the work."



The Kalene Mission Station where Margaret Hewitt works.

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