

A BUSH DOCTOR IN EAST AFRICA

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16th September 2011

Plas Hyfryd Hotel, Narbeth

From 1967 – 1976 I worked as the Medical Officer in single doctor hospitals in the arid, semi-deserts of north-eastern Uganda and northern Kenya. For most of the time it was among the Pokot people – a pastoral, semi-nomadic tribe, still living their traditional way of life, with their cattle and goats. Their subsistence diet consisted largely of blood and milk – sources of both tuberculosis and brucellosis. Intertribal cattle raids were common, and spear wounds a frequent problem. With water being scarce washing and cleanliness were non-existent. The people had no concept of micro-organisms, and so illness was blamed (as in Europe prior to the microscope) on other things – in the case of the Pokot on punishment by Tororut (God), or evil spirits, or a curse.

For some illnesses they used medicines derived from bush plants – eg the juice of aloes for discharging ears; crushed bark to promote lactation; another (poisonous) bark for “yellow disease” (Hepatitis A). For wounds, such as tissue necrosis from puff adder bites, and tropical ulcers, the wound might be bathed with cow’s urine, and then a poultice of mud or ash from the fire applied. Tetanus was common.

If an evil spirit was suspected (eg epilepsy or TB meningitis) multiple cuts would be made with an arrow head in the victim’s skin, to release the bad spirit. If this did not appear to work a sacrifice to Tororut would be made, of a goat or a cow. The lie of the animal’s viscera would be studied by the old men, to divine the cause of Tororut’s wrath. The patient might then be draped in the intestines, and smeared with their contents. Malaria, visceral leishmaniasis (kala-azar), gastroenteritis, amoebic dysentery, and tropical ulcers were rife.

This was the background to my medical work. It was my challenge, my frequent frustration, and my privilege to bring, in the context of a mission hospital, the knowledge and effectiveness of modern medicine, and surgery, and preventive medicine – often working in parallel with tribal healers. They were unforgettable years, unforgettable experience.