



Dr. Tarira (center) visiting the home of the first woman to receive nevirapine in a rural area to prevent mother-to-child-transmission (MTCT). The woman, Sabina, was the first HIV-positive pregnant woman to volunteer for the clinical trial at St. Albert's to show that rural hospitals are capable of administering the drug to prevent MTCT. Her son, who is HIV-negative, is on Dr. Tarira's right.



My Take: Why St. Albert's

by Darrell Ward

My admiration for the three women doctors, Elizabeth Tarira, Neela Naha, and Julia Musariri, who run St. Albert's Mission Hospital in Zimbabwe began during a visit to the hospital in December 2000 when a large delivery truck from the country's central medical supply arrived.

The hospital's Zimbabwean director, Elizabeth Tarira, MD, MPH, expected the truck to deliver 131 basic hospital items, but it brought just 17 of them. Missing were scalpel blades—the hospital had requested 1,000 each of four different sizes—sutures, crutches, surgical and exam gloves, disposable syringes, catheters, urinary drainage bags, gauze dressings, umbilical-cord clamps, autoclave control tape and many other items, including drugs. Following each missing item on the manifest were the words “Out of stock, please re-order.”

Zimbabwe's economy even then was in such a shambles it couldn't meet even the fundamental needs of its hospitals—and conditions in the country would soon become much worse. But this 140-bed hospital was the only one available to more than 115,000 impoverished people in this area of Zimbabwe some 120 miles north of the capital city of Harare.

St. Albert's, which serves an 1,800 square mile area, resides in a beautiful area of northern Zimbabwe on the edge of the Zambezi escarpment. Patients arrive on foot and by ox cart or kombi from villages on the escarpment and from the poorer, dryer, malaria-ridden Zambezi Valley down below. Some come from Mozambique.

My admiration for Dr. Tarira and the hospital's staff grew further when she took me to the hospital's Farm Project, 100 hectares

of land that she'd acquired for growing maize, peanuts, potatoes, green vegetables, carrots, beans, tomatoes—and pigs. The project provides food for hospital patients, and any surplus is sold to pay the farm workers.

I came to know the hospital's other programs and services: voluntary HIV/AIDS counseling and testing; home-based care for the chronically ill; matching orphans with donors who pay their school fees; caring for young, abandoned pregnant women and women with troubled pregnancies. Back home, I gave talks to help them and the people they served.



The Water Project reservoir

In 2004, a long-running drought was drying up the hospital's wells. Fearing the hospital might be forced to close, Dr. Tarira embarked on the Water Project. The initiative involved damming a seasonal stream that ran through the farm project to create a reservoir that would provide a back-up water supply. The project's success relied entirely on the generosity of donors.

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A friend at Ohio State helped me set up a website to help Dr. Tarira raise funds for the project. In Zimbabwe, inflation was out of control, reaching unbelievably into the millions of percent by early 2009. Spare-parts shortages and fuel costs slowed progress, but by March 2006, a reservoir shimmered in the sun and pipe was being laid from an adjacent holding tank to the hospital's water towers.

By late 2008, a purification system was in place and the Water Project was helping sustain the hospital. Dr. Tarira succeeded through dogged determination.

Through their dedication and perseverance the doctors of St. Albert's have endured national economic catastrophe, episodic political violence, and collapse of their country's health system. In 2009, a small group of volunteers came together to form Better Healthcare for Africa, Inc. (BHA), a 501(c)3 that seeks tax-deductible donations to help keep the hospital running.

In 2010 BHA provided supplies and equipment to the hospital, including an X-ray film processor and over 800 sutures. We are working with Brother's Brother Foundation to facilitate the shipment of containers of medical supplies to St. Albert's and other mission hospitals in Zimbabwe in 2011.

We also use our experiences and interactions with St. Albert's to interest and excite American students about global health and the value and rewards of doing service abroad and at home.

Since 2006, we've facilitated volunteer work at the hospital by



St. Albert's Mission Hospital

five nursing students and one young physician, a fellow in pediatrics. Other education efforts include giving talks at colleges and high schools about the challenges facing the doctors at St. Albert's and the people living in the region.

In spring 2011, Abby Davids, a fourth-year medical student and MPH candidate here at Ohio State, will be volunteering at St. Albert's. For her honors project in Family Medicine, Abby is writing on the BHA website about her trip and preparations for it. Her entries should help other students prepare for their own volunteer efforts, as well as provide interesting reading for the rest of us.

Please visit our [website](#) to follow Abby and other BHA activities. BHA is a tax-exempt volunteer organization with minimal overhead, so all donations are used to support BHA's mission and programs.



Dr. Julia Musariri giving HIV/AIDS education to people picking up their antiretroviral therapy.



Orphans being taught to farm at St. Albert's farm project



Volunteer home-based care workers



Child with burned hands in rehab