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Information sheet

St Anne's Hospital, Nkhotakota

St. Anne's Hospital celebrated its centenary in 2002. After the Anglican U.M.C.A (Universities Mission to Central Africa) mission station was set up at Nkhotakota in 1894, the need for medical care soon became obvious and eight years later, under the guidance of Dr. Robert Howard, a hospital with 20 beds for Africans and 2 for Europeans was opened. At that time this was one of the few centres of medical care in the country, the next nearest being 150 km away at Bandawe (set up by the free church of Scotland).

Nkhotakota is a largely Muslim area and settlement was only allowed under strict conditions imposed by Chief Jumbe, the descendant of an Arab slave trader who had met Dr. Livingstone there more than 30 years earlier. The fig tree, believed to be the site of that meeting, is just outside the hospital compound.

Although an Anglican foundation, there has always been a culture of religious tolerance in the administration of the hospital and its relations with the local people and no-one is refused admission.

St. Anne's developed mainly as a hospital for women and children, with a large maternity unit. For many years, until the early 1990's, it had a training school for enrolled nurse midwives run by missionary tutors. Nurses transferred here after completing their two years general nurse training elsewhere. Sadly, due to inadequate facilities and the difficulty of finding tutors, the school had to close. However, the emphasis on maternity work has continued and today St. Anne's acts as a referral hospital for gynaecology and obstetrics for the whole Nkhotakota district, with a population of 230,000, and its 15 health centres.

Ten years ago, the dilapidated state of the hospital buildings and poor facilities almost resulted in its closure but efforts made under successive expatriate doctors and with a considerable amount of financial help have transformed it. Large donations from the Stagecoach company, Lancing College, the Nchima Trust, USPG and many others have allowed the building of a new administration block, children's, female and maternity wards, operating theatres and laundry and the rehabilitation of other areas. St Anne's is now a well equipped, modern hospital of 130 beds. It is also responsible for 3 health centres at Chididi, Kapili and Liwaladzi, respectively 21, 35 and 40 km distant. Twelve outreach clinics are visited by trained staff each month to promote primary health care and preventive medicine.

Apart from in-patient care, available to all except men (there are six private male beds but as yet no public ward), there are out-patient services for all, a clinic for malnourished children, an integrated family planning/HIV/AIDS/STD project funded by the Save the Children Foundation and an orphan care project funded by the World Medical Fund of England. All these contribute to the overall health provision St. Anne's is able to provide.

As with most church hospitals, staffing is a problem, as there are few Malawian doctors and both they and the more highly qualified nurses prefer to work in the main cities. There is usually an expatriate Chief Medical Officer assisted by several Malawian clinical officers, a Matron who is a registered nurse and a staff mainly of enrolled nurse-midwives and ward assistants. Government provides the Malawian staff salaries but payments are not always regular and some allowances paid in state hospitals are not available. All other expenses have to be met by donations from expatriate supporters and fees charged to patients. Although these fees are small, many of the those in most need of treatment are very poor, and the hospital often finds itself subsidising them.