

Monday 3rd to Friday 7th of October

It's been a good week at work here. I feel like we are catching up a bit with the backlog that was here when I arrived, so it feels like the wards etc are a bit more under control – it was a bit hectic when I first got here. I also feel like I'm getting more used to the way things are done, meaning I'm a bit more efficient and probably (hopefully) I'm being of use to the local crowd.

Boston, the surgeon I've been covering while I'm here, was actually around for a couple of days. With two of us operating we were able to get a lot done. The orthopaedic theatres here consist of a 'big room' - which is more like a proper operating theatre – and a 'small room' which is more for smaller cases like manipulations of broken bones under anaesthesia, or drilling out of infected bones etc (which would not be considered a small case at home, but here is considered very minor!). So I have been doing the big room and Boston has been running the small room – meaning we have got through a lot of work.

It helps that Boston can run his own anaesthesia. He is quite happy doing spinal anaesthetics and tells me that he was taught by a certain Professor Molyneux (my mum) back in his junior days doing hundreds of lumbar punctures on the medical wards. With only one anaesthetist for the two rooms it is a useful skill to have. Here he is popping one in.



There is a major petrol shortage here, so there are big queues at all the petrol pumps:



There are always trucks temporarily abandoned at the side of the road – either because they have broken down or run out of fuel. When you look at trucks like this you can imagine just how safe the brakes are...



So when you combine that with people desperate to get places as cheaply as possible you can see where accidents can happen:



Saturday 8th and Sunday 9th October

I have managed to borrow a bike from Byron McCord, who is an Alaskan doctor who comes to Mzuzu for a few months each year. Despite being 80, he is apparently still fit as a fiddle and kindly said I could use his bike while I'm here. I didn't really know what to expect but I have to admit I was not expecting a folding bike with tiny wheels – I'm not sure anything could be less appropriate for the Malawi roads!



I was invited to a local football final in a nearby village, so with some trepidation set off on Friday the Folding bike, only to find that actually it rides remarkably well, even on the bumpy roads round here.

The football match was due to start at 1pm about 12 miles away so I thought I would leave at 12 and maybe arrive a little late. Unfortunately I managed to get myself completely lost and ended up heading down ever smaller tiny little paths in the bush into increasingly remote territory. I walked the bike for a fair bit of this – Friday the Folder isn't really designed for off road!







The few locals I met were all very friendly but didn't speak a word of English so weren't particularly able to help me. When I asked for the village (Malivenji) they would simply point vaguely onwards and say "uko" which means "far". I'm not sure they really understood.

By this point I had run out of water and was beginning to get a bit worried (although not very, as I knew I could find water in one of the villages or in a stream somewhere if I really had to – it would just risk a subsequent horrendous bout of illness) but luckily I came across these two young guys who very excitedly pointed me on the right route, once they were able to understand my mangled pronunciation of “Malvenji”.



The younger guy was carrying something very precious tucked into that cloth and burst out giggling when I tried to ask what it was – but adamantly refused to show me. As I cycled off the pair of them continued to guffaw wildly – whether at me, at my ludicrous bike, at the fact that they had just seen a Wazungu, or at the stuff he was carrying I will never know.

Eventually I made it to the football ground at about 2.30pm, only to find nobody there. I found someone sitting under a tree who assured me that the game would start “soon”. Finally people began to gather by about 3.30 and some pre-match entertainment and singing began.



The pitch was a classic Malawian version of bare earth:



Unfortunately I never got to see the end of the game because I had to leave at 4pm. It gets dark here at about 6pm and I really didn't want to risk being on the roads in the dark with no lights. I'm told it ended in penalties in pitch blackness.

Monday 10th to 15th October

An ambulance came on Monday to transfer one of our patients to Blantyre for spinal treatment. There are about 70 ambulances in Malawi, I believe, but they aren't used to pick people up from their houses or the roadside, but instead are for transporting between hospitals. I hate to say it they seem to be used most to take politicians and senior health officials to places they need to go (meetings, site visits, shops....). But what a beast of a truck.



Unfortunately they don't come with much in the way of equipment – no oxygen or anything, so can't really do a huge amount in the way of treatment for people at the site of an accident or on the way to hospital. Interestingly, I was at a talk recently given by one of the orthopaedic clinical officers about how to deal with roadside emergencies. The basic message was to stay away until the police arrive for fear of becoming the victim of misplaced mob justice... disappointing as a concept!

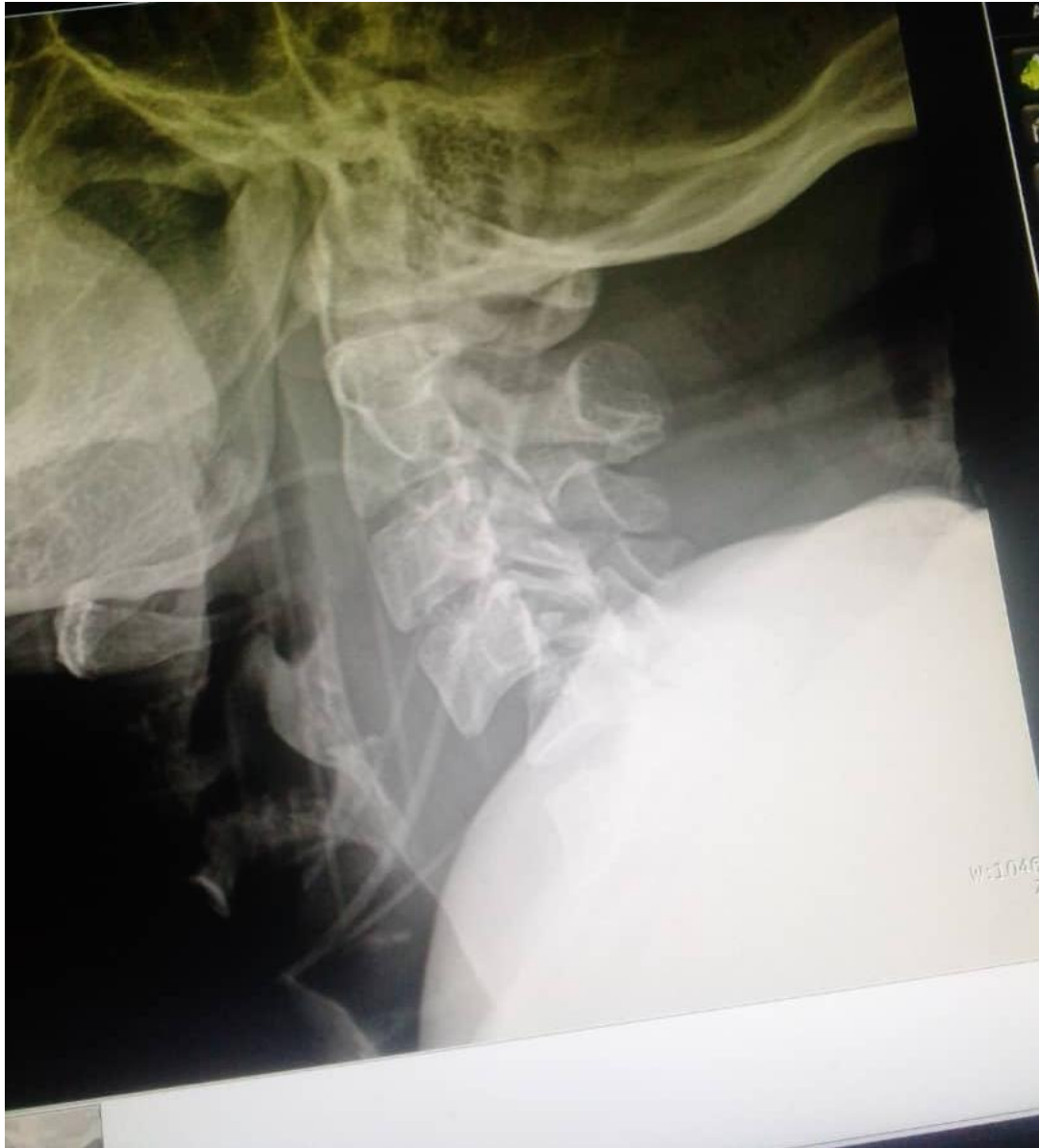
I managed to get a photo of one of the patients before he was injured. Ok, not really, it is of his mate who was with him at the time but wasn't injured. These poor guys are on the road and desperate not to move off it as it is very difficult on the rough road edge. Unfortunately a car came too close and clipped my patient knocking him over and causing a nasty distal femoral fracture, with loads of other scratches and injuries as the load from his bike landed on top of him. No wonder he was injured – check out this fully laden bike.



This next lady didn't end up with us but gives you an idea of the risks people have to take. She is on a bicycle taxi but clearly needs to get her new mattress home so has it on her head on the back of the bike in a queue of noisy traffic. Once again the road edge means the cyclist is very reluctant to move over so everyone squeezes right next to each other.



And the amount that people place on their heads can be quite extreme. This poor chap was carrying a heavy load of wood when his neck gave way without warning and he could no longer move his arms or legs – the weight was sufficient to cause him a cervical dislocation (for non medics – look for the line at the front of his neck bones – they should all form a smooth column. His shows a big step between the fourth and fifth vertebrae you can see counting down from the top). His prognosis is not good as there is no real support/ care network sufficient to look after people in his situation.



But in better neck news – this little 10 year old girl fell out of the back of an ox cart landing on her head. She was unable to move her arms but was able to move her legs. This persisted for a couple of days and her mother started the process of bringing her to us. Luckily her arm function improved and by the time I met her two weeks after injury she was completely pain free and moving her neck fully without difficulty and her arm function was normal. If you look at the same line on her x-ray she has a fracture dislocation right at the top (peg fracture). She should really have died – but after discussion with the spinal team we think she got away with it and will hopefully do fine. In the UK she might well get an operation but the spinal team don't have the necessary kit here (can't even get her an MRI).



15th to 23rd October

This was holiday week for me and the family came out to visit. I travelled round with my Mum, wife Heath and the three kids (Fin, Eddie and Anna). We had a fantastic time visiting the lake, Mulanje Mountain and Liwonde Game Reserve. I could post a thousand pics but I'll just do a few to whet your appetites.





And this has to be my favourite. This cheeky chap walked right into our camp so this photo is taken (nervously!) from about 5 feet away – no zoom needed for this one! He hung around our tent most of the night munching on leaves and drinking from the river.

