

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Lucy Carter

CEO of Sound Seekers

Sound Seekers is a UK based charity, seeking to help deaf people, particularly children, in the poorest communities in the world. The aim is to work in partnership with local organisations and institutions to ensure we deliver sustainable and cost-effective projects that advance understanding of deaf people's needs and improve their access to health services, education, and social support, together with initiatives that enable people to avoid, or overcome, the effects of deafness. **Lucy Carter** has been the CEO of Sound Seekers since July 2012, having a rich and varied background in management consulting and as a government advisor in both Afghanistan and Rwanda. Her mission is to transform and modernise Sound Seekers, and Lucy has a particular focus on capacity building for hearing health-care professionals in Africa. **David Baguley** recently caught up with Lucy to find out more about Sound Seekers, and her role in particular.

How did you get involved in the field of hearing impairment?

It was a completely random piece of luck. I had absolutely no experience of anyone with hearing loss, except for my grandfather having some unsurprising age-related loss. I was preparing to take a year's unpaid sabbatical from my job with a global management consultancy firm, and had applied to Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). I wanted to work with children, but VSO kept offering me the same sort of thing that I was doing in the UK – which was exactly what I wanted to escape. At my work's Christmas do, someone I barely knew mentioned that he supported a charity that helped a school for deaf children in Tanzania, and suggested that I go there. Two glasses of wine later and I had said yes. It all started there.

As you mention, your experience previous to Sound Seekers included Tanzanear, working with a school for the deaf in Dar Es Salaam. What did you learn from this?

It's almost hard to know where to start, as it changed my life so completely. On a technical level, I learned about the range of hearing

loss and how there is so much in between 'deaf' and 'hearing'. I learned about how important talking to people with hearing loss is, that sign language is only part of communication. I learned how subtle and beautiful signing can be, and how much you can communicate without even that. This was a lovely surprise to me, as I had been very word-focussed before that, definitely prioritising the perfectly nuanced draft or an elegant punchline. But I think, most of all, that I learned how much I'd been spoiled by my nice life in the UK. I went on sabbatical because I felt trapped by a high salary that I thought I needed, in a job that I wasn't sure about any more. Making real friends with people who had very little was a huge jolt: I realised that my 'problems' were enviable and would indeed have been envied if I'd been tactless enough to share them. My values changed that year.

What attracted you to be involved with Sound Seekers?

Everything! It's a charity, it's about hearing loss, it worked in Africa, it needed to change and had a Board supportive of that change. It was a perfect move.



Lucy Carter

How is the work of Sound Seekers developing?

I am so excited about this. We are improving our 'old' projects, training people to deliver audiological services better and updating equipment. And we have some new projects that enable us to move away from just providing a mobile clinic and work more deeply in our project countries: for example, we are providing targeted paediatric



View from the Mbongo Baptist Hospital in Cameroon.

screening in Sierra Leone, tele-audiology in Zambia, improved access to education in the Gambia and prevention and ear care in Cameroon. Our flagship project is in Malawi, where we have had the best sort of donation: one which will cover everything needed to set up and deliver a comprehensive audiology service in southern Malawi at the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre, led by Malawian nationals. Our aim is for it to be sustainable and high-quality, leaving a lasting legacy for Malawi.

What are the greatest challenges in supporting hearing-impaired people in the non-developed world?

Building capacity and keeping it there and up-to-date is a huge challenge. We are all about increasing the skill levels of people from the countries where we work, contributing to the infrastructure – it's really important to us that Sound Seekers takes responsibility for transferring skills to people in Africa, not just filling a gap and going home again. Raising the money to do this and building the relationships that mean trained people stay in their roles and don't get 'poached' is tough. Equipment breaks more quickly in very humid or dusty environments (it's hard to imagine just how hot, sweaty and filthy everything gets until you actually go somewhere where you are desperate to shower and put on clean clothes three times a day – then you realise). And like building a new road here, every time we manage to do something, it just creates more need. Providing hearing aids is of course just the start of the journey: next comes the need for follow-up, rehabilitation and for children, helping them into the right education.

I think anyone leading a small charity would say that these are hard times. Fundraising is tough, especially as many people don't realise how isolating hearing loss is, and how just a small



Top: Lucy Carter and Serah Ndegwa, audiologist and course co-ordinator at University of Nairobi.

Centre: Our partners in Malawi: the Malawian team at the ABC Clinic in Lilongwe, with audiologists Pete and Bec Bartlett and the mobile clinic donated by Sound Seekers.

Bottom: Road sign near school for deaf children in Cameroon.

donation could turn a life round. And the charity landscape is changing: life is tougher now and charities with similar or overlapping aims need to think long and hard about how we can join forces and work together.

How can clinicians work effectively with organisations like Sound Seekers?

There is a role for everyone. We are indebted to the audiologists who have gone out to our projects, giving their time to deliver training, providing continual professional development (CPD), support and confidence-building. Without exception, they have worked long hours in difficult environments and every single one has increased the quality of services that patients receive. We also value clinicians who can spare some time to provide advice to our projects and fundraising proposals.

What technological innovation would most benefit your work?

Interesting question. It's often not so much that the technology doesn't exist as that we can't afford it. Our tele-audiology project in Zambia is genuinely innovative and enables remote testing over just the existing 3G phone network: if we could do more of this, we could help project teams build their skills through virtual supervision. On technology that I don't think exists yet, an easy way to make ear moulds in



Elizabeth dancing. Elizabeth is a little girl in Zambia who now has hearing aids.

hot, dusty places with frequent power-cuts would help. And solar-powered hearing-aid batteries: I feel that these are on their way, and this would make a huge difference – but they are not widely available yet. Finally, an app to collect data on a cheap smartphone would be a game-changer. It sounds dull, but it is very hard for us to get good data in from the field. And without being able to explain our impact, we can't show donors that we have spent their money responsibly, or look for more.

How do you relax away from work?

I am not sure I do! I need to work on this. Cycling home through London

traffic every day at least makes me focus on staying alive and takes my mind off the spreadsheet I was working on.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY



Dr David Baguley,
PhD, MBA,
Cambridge University
Hospitals NHS
Foundation Trust,
Cambridge, UK.
E: dmb29@cam.ac.uk