

25 years of the Tropical Health and Education Trust

Talha Khan Burki looks back at the 25 year history of the Tropical Health Education Trust, which works to build partnerships in global health between the UK and resource-poor countries.

As the sun began to set on the British Empire, the colonial power worried about provision of higher education in the soon-to-be independent territories. Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Jerusalem, Malta, and Hong Kong hosted universities, and there were a handful of colleges scattered across the West Indies and Africa. But this could scarcely be considered adequate. In 1945, a Government Commission recommended the formation of the Inter University Council for Higher Education in the Colonies. It was duly established the following year (it later changed its designation to the Inter University Council for Higher Education Overseas), with the aim of assisting the new countries to set up sturdy and enduring systems of tertiary education.

"The Council was terribly supportive in helping African universities and others to develop in the postwar period", explains Eldryd Parry, cofounder of the Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET). "We saw that because we had benefited from their support in the early years when we were Africa."

Parry began teaching at Nigeria's University of Ibadan in 1960, on secondment from London's Hammersmith Hospital. He spent time in Ethiopia and would later serve as dean of medicine at universities in Nigeria and Ghana. In all, Parry and his wife Helen spent 25 years working in education in Africa.

The 1970s and 1980s were an exceptionally tumultuous period for the African continent. Countries were wracked by conflict, disease, famine, military coups, and poverty. Small wonder government services failed. Health policies were shaped by the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration, which

established primary health care as the cornerstone of an effective public health system. "So the development industry and governments turned all their attention to primary health care, but they forgot a critical component: the teaching of medical students", recalls Parry. Around the same time, the Inter University Council lost its identity within the British Council. Its

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work took a lower priority; support for British institutions to develop and maintain links with their counterparts in developing countries faded. It was to this background that Eldryd and Helen Parry, along with Richard Southwell, a senior member of the Queen's Counsel, set up THET, which this year celebrates its 25 year anniversary.

THET's vision

"We were promoting a vision not of an ivory tower but something that was intimately related to the needs of institutions to deliver care in their own society", affirmed Eldryd Parry. THET envisaged links between health professionals and universities in the UK and institutions in low-income and middle-income countries, initially in Africa, with the intention of bolstering education and training in the developing country. "Our approach was not the north telling the south what to do, but the south's voice shaping and framing what was needed", Parry told *The Lancet*.

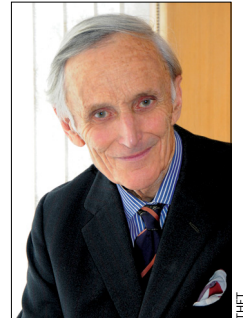
He would approach the individual charged with overseeing medical

services in a country, a university dean or head of a school of nursing and ask what it was they were trying to achieve and how THET might be able to assist. "It was not prescriptive, with the arrogance of money from the north, but responsive, with the humility to understand that there are needs that are very well understood and expressed by universities and teaching hospitals in the developing world", outlined Parry. "Once trust has been built up, perhaps then you can say 'well wouldn't such and such be a good idea?'"

Opportunities soon arose to work in areas that others had ignored—eg, surgery and anaesthesia. THET was asked to support the training of psychiatric clinical officers in Uganda, and orthopaedic clinical officers in Malawi. Funding would come from UK charitable trusts, and later the lottery fund.

Long-running partnerships

Michael Silverman, a specialist in child health and former THET trustee, oversaw the oldest continuing project, an 18-year-old partnership that joins Leicester National Health Service (NHS) Trust and both of the



Eldryd Parry



THET funds a long-term UK volunteer project in five African countries



Timur Bekir, THET

THET-sponsored programme training community health workers in Somaliland



THET

Jane Cockerell

city's universities with the University of Gondar in northern Ethiopia. "We wanted something that was not charity or humanitarian work but a two-way professional programme, a partnership for the long-term", said Silverman. The link supports a wide-range of health-related activities, including a sizeable mental health project in Gondar, encompassing a training programme for mental health nurses and north Ethiopia's first inpatient unit. There is no mistaking the need: this is a region with a population of 6 million and no consultant psychiatrists.

British volunteers working alongside their overseas colleagues also benefit, developing leadership and problem-solving skills. They gain experience of disease and states of disease that are rarely visible in the UK, and engage in intensive medicine and surgery. They also participate in teaching programmes and curricula development at a level usually unavailable in their home country. And, of course, they return with a better understanding of intercultural relationships. Cerdic Hall, a mental health nurse who has developed a health partnership in Uganda, points out that he was enriched by the experience. "I learned how to get the process right, rather than just jump to solutions from my own frame of reference", he said. Meanwhile, Ugandan nurses seconded to the UK leave with all kinds of ideas as to how to

improve services in their own country. Last year, THET supported more than 600 NHS staff in overseas volunteer roles, and almost 14 000 health workers in 26 African and Asian nations benefited from training and support from peers and colleagues in the UK.

Often, the best way to meet a country's needs is by creating curricula for a specific qualification. In Gondar, this led to the establishment of MSc programmes tailored to the needs of Ethiopian health professionals, including anaesthetists, nurses, physiotherapists, and in Mbarara, Uganda, an MMed programme in medicine was created.

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All of which is in keeping with Parry's driving philosophy. He was editor of the textbook *Principles of Medicine in Africa*, now in its fourth edition, which was firmly embedded in the local context. "I did not want to just reproduce a book that would be appropriate to the north", he said.

New era

Parry relinquished his role at the helm of THET in 2007. Since then, the organisation has taken on the £30 million Health Partnership Scheme (HPS) run by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which supports more than 80 projects in more than 20 countries (aside from this work, THET continues to operate country programmes in Zambia and Somaliland). Overseeing expenditure of public funds necessitates a rigorous approach to quantifying progress.

"To work on this scale, we have to demonstrate that we are making a change with taxpayer money", stresses THET's chief executive Jane Cockerell.

Their website is full of relevant statistics—graduates trained and curricula improved—but it is tricky for projects aimed at building expertise to fall in with targets in the same way as, say, vaccination campaigns. Nonetheless, Silverman believes that the partnerships have not assessed their work as assiduously as they might have done. "It is a deficiency of the funding schemes", he explained. "Often there is no funding left when a project comes to an end to evaluate the longer-term consequences of an activity." The evaluation procedures do take into account the size of a project, with smaller ones not expected to give the same kind of reckoning as larger ones. "We are keen to show DFID that this work makes a meaningful contribution, both at the local level but also to the UK's global health agenda, and deserves continued government support."

Today, there is much less conflict in Africa than there was a quarter of a century ago (*The Economist* has theorised that the old guerilla leaders just got tired of fighting), and the world is a richer place. The Millennium Development Goals are soon to give way to the Sustainable Development Goals, a shift in rhetoric and focus that moves the international agenda closer to THET's governing ethos. The field of development economics has flourished and think tanks have broadened the academic underpinnings of the field. There have been expansions elsewhere in academia. "25 years ago, we would not have focused on the further academic development of the young physician, but nowadays every institution thinks in those terms—that's a deep change", said Parry.

He sometimes questions what he would do if he was starting THET today. "I would keep to exactly the same philosophy: where are you going? How can we help you get there?", he said. "But I would get different answers to the ones I had 25 years ago."

Talha Khan Burki