



Mother's Day in an African Hospital

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Letter to the Editor

Twice a year, our team of about 10 physicians, surgeons and nurses moves to an African hospital and works there for a period of one to two weeks. We are relatively used to poverty, malnutrition, untreated diseases, abandoned children... And sometimes we feel that our actions are worthless. This was the case for me when flying to Brazzaville a nice evening of May 2002 and also thinking I would not be home with my wife and children for Mother's Day two days later.

The subsequent hours proved me wrong, when we began to work in the African hospital. A young mother presented with her baby to the overcrowded preoperative consulting room late in the afternoon. I was first surprised by her quite out of The Bible emanating name, *Sara*.

Sara was not 90 years old, but only 17 (and she looked about 13) when she had her first baby. She had been admitted to "our" hospital for surgery for multiple breast abscesses. Discontinuation of breast-feeding for 2 weeks had resulted in progressive malnutrition and dehydration of her 3-months old daughter who weighted only 6 pounds.

Sara came from abroad. Like many other pregnant African teenagers, she had no family or husband. The father of her child had returned to one of the many wars devastating Central Africa. Like her baby, *Sara* had had nothing to eat for several days. She understood how life-threatening their condition was. To survive, she had walked for several days to the inner city with the hope that there might be food and health care facilities for her daughter. Finally, *Sara* and her child were admitted to hospital.

Soon after she was operated on and an intravenous infusion had been administered to her baby, *Sara* came to visit her in the "ICU" and the young mother's eyes lit up. Today, she saved her baby.

In our Western countries, May 26 is Mother's Day, but *Sara* had never heard of Mother's Day. She is just a mother. A very young one, as many others in Africa, who need less poverty, less isolation and wars, and more hope.

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Received Date: 30 Aug 2018

Accepted Date: 02 Oct 2018

Published Date: 05 Oct 2018

Citation:

Monsuez J-J, Sarfati E, Medici L, Maylin M. Mother's Day in an African Hospital. Clin Surg. 2018; 3: 2141.

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