

John Bridson: making a difference

Charles Essex talks to John Bridson, whose international career only started after he retired



John Bridson

A reply to a notice in a Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health newsletter led to a second career for John Bridson, retired consultant paediatrician in Barnsley. "I saw a request from the medical director of Child Advocacy International, asking if any paediatric departments in the United Kingdom would be willing to be twinned with paediatric departments in underdeveloped and poor countries," he says. This resulted in a link, which is now seven years old, with the paediatric department at the Mother Teresa University Hospital in Tirana, Albania.

Baby lambs?

John set about raising funds locally, under the banner of BAA-LAMB (Barnsley Aids Albania-Love and Much Benefit). "Baa-lamb is the local word for a baby lamb," John says. "It obviously struck a chord, because we raised over £60 000 (\$108 000; €89 000)."

In a previous life

For many years John had been a consultant paediatrician at Barnsley District General Hospital. He worked a "one in two," with very little middle grade cover until the hospital appointed some additional consultants. Subsequently, John started to shadow the medical director, with a view to applying for that role and reducing to part time his clinical work. Things turned out differently, though. "I failed to get the job as medical director at the hospital and wondered what I was going to do in my retirement," he says.

Albania . . .

John is now the lead medical trustee for Child Advocacy International (CAI). The charity has projects in 10 countries, of which John has visited five, assessing projects and sometimes troubleshooting.

His main interest lies in Albania. According to John, he was never one for research. However, the health problems he has seen there have led him to write a paper on iodine deficiency in the Albanian diet, in collaboration with colleagues from Albania and the United Kingdom. He is already preparing data for a second paper and feels this will add notably to the knowledge of the management and treatment of iodine deficiency. "The local diet is so deficient in iodine in Albania that many children are likely to be several IQ points below what they should be."



Tirana skyline



PHIL NOBLE/PA/EMPHICS

. . . and Barnsley

John would describe himself with genuine modesty as a jobbing paediatrician from a district general hospital. For several years he has helped to organise an annual international paediatric conference in Albania. "It is 'international' because it has speakers from western Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom—and Barnsley," he says with typical dry humour. "I take the specialist registrar with me, and we present papers. What we say is translated into Albanian, and the PowerPoint presentation is also in Albanian." Every year, two Albanian paediatricians get the opportunity to come to Barnsley, and they have attended further training in neighbouring teaching units.

Career opportunities

John has enjoyed the opportunity to travel and spend time in a different culture. He has been particularly impressed with the strong family values and loyalty, and with the hospitality he has encountered. He also appreciates the time to think and reflect. "As doctors we probably don't realise at what a fast pace we live our lives," he says.

To doctors considering doing humanitarian aid work, John says, "I took advantage of an opportunity that arose. If you look around you will find something quickly. You get as much out of it as you are prepared to put into it." As a doctor in a substantive post, John found that the support of his trust was vital in the early days.

"I learnt early in my career to give families and colleagues information on which they could choose to act. I try never to give advice. I suppose my advice to young (and not so young) doctors would be, 'Do not give advice; give information.'"

Real doctoring

John is still doing one clinic a week at the hospital in Barnsley, but he says "The work in Albania gets us away from 'defensive' medicine and into real doctoring." John's only regret is that he would have liked to have wound down more gradually from full time clinical work and being on-call, and done more part time work before retiring. This option was not commonly available at the time he took retirement. His new activities are keeping him busy, however, and he was just about to fly to Addis Ababa when I caught up with him.

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CAI's website is www.childadvocacyinternational.co.uk