

## FEATURE

## BMJ GROUP IMPROVING HEALTH AWARDS 2012: KAREN WOO AWARDS

## Remembering Karen Woo

Sophie Arie introduces the individuals shortlisted for the Karen Woo award

Sophie Arie *freelance journalist*

In August 2010, British doctor Karen Woo was killed while delivering basic healthcare to some of the most needy people in rural Afghanistan. The team she was with had taken a week to trek to the remote province of Nuristan, in the Hindu Kush, where they had treated over 1500 people for ophthalmic, dental, and general medical problems. Woo and the entire team were killed when their vehicle was ambushed on their journey home.

This year, for the first time, a new BMJ Group Improving Health Awards seeks to recognise individuals who, like Woo, have shown a passion that goes well beyond the normal obligations of the medical profession and delivered quality care in a challenging environment, sometimes at great personal cost. The four candidates shortlisted for the award, sponsored by Bupa, for which Karen Woo had worked in the past, are all individuals whose dedication has made a remarkable difference to communities where they have worked. The judges, including Dr Woo's brother Andrew Woo, will decide who best personifies the traditional values of medicine: altruism, service, and courage.

### Michael Bryant, Mercy Ships Sierra Leone

When Dr Michael Bryant, 26, arrived 18 months ago in Freetown, Sierra Leone, to work in a hospital set up by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Mercy Ships in 2004, he soon realised that despite the immense difficulties of working in this west African country where 20% of children die before they are 5 years old, there was potential to do more than his remit set out. Along with a Congolese colleague, he extended the hours of their outpatient clinic and improved the triage system, with the result that now, no child who is brought to the clinic is turned away for lack of time. Bryant, who lived in Senegal for 10 years as a child, decided communication with the parents of sick children was vital in order to gain their confidence and spread the word that help was available—so he learnt enough of the lingua franca, Krio, to speak to patients and their parents in their own language. In 18 months, the numbers of children receiving care at the Mercy Ships clinic has almost doubled to 1200 children every month, compared with 700 when Dr Bryant arrived.

### Hannah McLean, African Prisons Project

It's hard enough getting healthcare to ordinary people in the world's poorest countries. Imagine the difficulties involved in getting decent healthcare to the criminals packed into the jails those countries run. Dr Hannah McLean, 26, has been working for the NGO African Prisons Project since before she graduated, developing a medical centre at Kampala Remand Prison in Uganda as well as a welfare office and a library. African prisons are often unsanitary, overcrowded, dangerous places where diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, scabies, cholera, and typhoid are rife and the local culture dismisses the inmates as worthless. "When you see that much need, there's something that draws you to it," she says. "Because it's so bad, there's always something you can do." Using the unique experience she gained during her years "inside" (she recalls once finding herself in a room with 150 convicted death row prisoners and realising there was no guard) McLean now works on strategy across Africa for the Africa Prisons Project.

### Lucy Mathen, Second Sight

Lucy Mathen worked as a journalist for 15 years before an interview with a doctor in Afghanistan made her realise that basic healthcare could do infinitely more for ordinary people in the world's most troubled countries than journalism ever could. She retrained as a doctor and today she runs the charity Second Sight, which works to eradicate cataract blindness in India. Indignant at the failure of large NGOs to reach Bihar and Orissa states, where the cataract blindness problem is the worst in the world, she decided she would do it herself, travelling to the most remote areas, finding local eye doctors, and supporting them personally and financially. In 2011, over 50 000 people had their sight restored at one hospital in Bihar, with most of their treatment funded by Second Sight. Mathen's aim is to eradicate cataract blindness from these parts of India by 2020.

### Magdi Hanafy, Operation Hernia

Magdi Hanafy is a surgeon at Leighton Hospital, Crewe. He is also a package tour operator like no other, according to Virginia

Long, the colleague who nominated him for this award. Hanafy runs the Crewe branch of Operation Hernia, the charity that repairs hernias and provides aftercare for people in Africa who don't have access to proper health services. Although his qualities as a surgeon are no doubt essential to this work, it is his exceptional personal strength for organising each trip that makes him unique. While holding down a day job and family commitments, Hanafy arranges visas, raises funds, buys equipment, and finds local translators and accommodation on the ground so that the team of health professionals from Crewe

can focus on their clinical work each time they make a trip. (For more information on Operation Hernia, see *BMJ* 2011;343:d7448, doi:10.1136/bmj.d7448.)

The Karen Woo Award is sponsored by Bupa.

For more information about the BMJ Group Improving Health Awards 2012 go to <http://groupawards.bmj.com>.

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