

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Dr Ian Smith in Pakistan with Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders)

The unique tent hospital that Brisbane (Toowong) anaesthetist, Dr Ian Smith, helped put up in nine days soon after the Pakistan earthquake on October 9 had facilities as good as hospitals in some Australian regional cities.

The hospital, at Mansehra, 48km from Balakot (the main town affected by the earthquake) is the only hospital for more than 100,000 people whose homes the earthquake destroyed.

Just as Dr Smith was helping to finish the first tent-hospital operation (a fractured hip), he and the surgeon were called away to perform a caesarean on a woman with obstructed labour. The mother and baby survived.

Dr Smith said, "We put extraordinary effort into getting the hospital up and working as quickly as possible. After 200 operations in three weeks, we knew it was working well. It comprises nine tents connected together, made for Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in Europe: four operating theatres, a six-bed intensive care tent, an emergency tent and tents for about 100 patients on beds in general wards.

"This was the first time, to my knowledge, that a tent hospital has



The MSF Inflatable tent hospital in Mansehra, North West Frontier Province (Pakistan) for the October 2005 earthquake. © Remi Vallet / MSF.



Dr Smith with MSF nurse Francesca Pinzone from Sydney.

been made and used by MSF or any other aid organisation," said Dr Smith. "It replaced a hospital that the earthquake destroyed and came with all the equipment, in 150 boxes, needed for 300 different operations."

More than 20 doctors and nurses worked in the tent hospital, including Dr Smith and a Sydney nurse, Francesca Pinzone. Next door were facilities for outpatients. The hospital will stay at Mansehra for at least a year while the damaged hospital is rebuilt.

In the first three weeks after the first operation, Dr Smith was the anaesthetist at 200 more operations, from 15 to 20 a day. "We could do far more operations – and in more sterile conditions – than otherwise," he said.

"Most operations were for injuries from the earthquake, such as fractures that had set wrongly or had become infected. Some operations were complicated, such as one on an eight-year-old boy whose eye we saved after it was very badly injured."

Another boy was the only person who survived when the earthquake destroyed a concrete school and



MSF Doctors with a patient in the tent hospital.

about a thousand teachers and children were killed. The reason the boy lived: he was late for school that day.

Every few days after the earthquake, there was an earth tremor – the reason Dr Smith chose to live in a tent while he was there.

Nick Lawson, an Australian who was Medecins Sans Frontieres' head of mission two days after the earthquake, said: "We identified families who had received poor-quality tents and exchanged them for ones suited to the winter climate. We also distributed more blankets and other basic needs, such as kerosene heaters."

Dr Smith worked previously for the Northern Territory Health Department in Katherine and for MSF in Aceh after the Indian Ocean tsunami. He is now talking to the MSF Australia office in Sydney about doing another mission, in Liberia.

For information about Medecins Sans Frontieres, phone 1300 13 60 61 or visit the website, www.msf.org.au.

By Philip Luker, a journalist with MSF.