



THE SURGERY SHIP



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY FIONA HALL



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Out on the ocean, a ship of doctors and nurses is travelling to the poorest of the poor living in West Africa. It carries lifesaving medical services for people who have none: children who suffer with terrible leg deformities; women outcast from their communities by birthing fistulas; vast tumours of all shapes and sizes which afflict the unlucky. With no medical help, sufferers must survive the best they can – unless the ship is in port.

The ship docks in a different country every year and people come from all corners of the globe. It is the last hope for so many – and if they miss the boat, there is no other chance.

On arrival, a flood of patients pours into the port, but in this medical lottery not everyone can win. For the lucky ones, doctors will carry out lifesaving operations on unbelievable cases. Many of these illnesses do not exist outside of West Africa and have never been seen before by these doctors.

Nonetheless, the volunteer medics must make on-the-spot, life-and-death decisions. Some are too far gone to treat, others not deemed severe enough – and the worst group are the patients in the middle, where treatment may bring uncertain outcome, but no treatment means certain death. A confronting, complex journey for the volunteer doctors and nurses, it will be a case of life and death for many of the patients.

By the end, it is not just the patients who are transformed. The young nurses and doctors will be challenged to the limits of their training and



abilities. Nerida is a young and idealistic yet inexperienced surgeon who will face a patient who cannot be fully cured. Neil is a mature doctor who has left his steady practise to go to one of the most out-of-control countries on earth. Dan will form an unexpectedly deep connection with a young child, whom he must leave

at the end of the year in Guinea. Told through their eyes, we follow the dramatic and confronting events as they unfold on *The Surgery Ship*.

Top: Suffering from an aggressive neuro-fibroma tumour, Maimuna can't wait to be 'normal' so that she can go to school. **Bottom:** Neil prepares for the day's list of surgeries.

CURRICULUM LINKS

- 1 The Australian National Curriculum (History) at Year 10 provides a study of the history of the modern world and Australia from 1918 to the present. Overview content for this unit include:

- Developments in technology, public health, longevity and standard of living during the twentieth century, and concern for the environment and sustainability.

The Surgery Ship could be used as supplementary text when exploring the above.

- 2 Senior students studying subjects such as Health & Human Development, Personal Development and Health and Physical Education can use *The Surgery Ship* as a supplementary text when studying concepts such as:

- A global perspective on achieving improvements in health and human development.
- Identifying similarities and differences in health status between people living in developing countries and Australians, and analyse reasons for these differences.
- Exploring the role of international organisations in achieving sustainable improvements in health and human development, as well as Australia's contribution to international health programmes through AusAid and contributions to non-government organisations.



Top: Nick says goodbye to a patient. Bottom: Maimuna has her final appointment with the Mercy Ship outpatient's staff and is given the all-clear.

STATISTICS	AUSTRALIA	GUINEA
Total population	23 050 000	11 451 000
Gross national income per capita (International \$)	\$38,110.00	\$1,020.00
Life expectancy at birth	80 (males) 84 (females)	54 (males) 56 (females)
Probability of dying under five (per 1000 live births)	5	101
Probability of dying between 15 and 60 years (per 1000 population)	80 (males) 46 (females)	348 (males) 294 (females)
Total expenditure on health per capita (international \$)	\$3,692.00	\$67.00
Total expenditure on health as % of GDP (2011)	9	6.0

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

The Surgery Ship presents viewers with some terrible illnesses that no longer exist in the West. Before viewing the documentary, students should conduct some preliminary research into the health profile of Guinea and the West Africa region:

- 1 Look at the statistics regarding Guinea and Australia (see table this page). Figures are for 2009 unless indicated. Source: Global Health Observatory

West Africa at a Glance

- Access to and quality of health care is very inadequate, even for those who can afford to visit a clinic.
- An estimated 70 per cent of the population live on less than \$2 a day.
- There are only two doctors for every 10,000 people – compared to twenty-five for every 10,000 people in Australia.
- Similarly, a woman living in sub-Saharan Africa has a one in sixteen chance of dying during pregnancy – compared to a one in 13,300 risk for a woman in Australia.





1: SS Stills_-2-10 2: The Africa Mercy docked in the port of Conakry, in the West African nation of Guinea. 3: Neil operates on a patient on board the Africa Mercy. 4: Yaya suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta, or 'brittle bone' disease. After months of recuperation he is ready to leave the ship in a new suit! 5: Nerida and Tertius operate on Maimuna, a difficult procedure that lasted several hours.

4 Despite having great mineral wealth, Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world. The country ranks 178th of 187 countries classified by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index in 2011. More than half the population lives below the poverty line, and about 20 per cent live in extreme poverty (40 per cent of children below five years of age are chronically malnourished).

In the 1990s, the country enjoyed a period of stability and economic growth, driven mainly by mining and agriculture, which led to a marked improvement in poverty levels. Since 2000, however, Guinea has been hit by a series of political, social and governance crises, resulting in a deteriorating socio-economic situation.

- Visit the following website: <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/guinea>
- Create a one-page profile of Guinea, including information about its history, current status and details of one of the poverty reduction programmes that is currently in place.

Statistics from the 2011 Human Development Index, WHO Mortality Profile, WHO Health Workforce, UNICEF

- As a class, study and discuss the above statistics. Prompts for discussion:
 - Which statistics are most surprising/concerning and why?
 - Which ones are linked and why? (such as total expenditure on health and death probability/life expectancy).
 - How would these figures impact Guinea society (economically, politically, socially)?
- 2 The following diseases are common in Guinea. Select one and research its prevalence (in Guinea and contrasted with the developed world), impact and treatment: Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, HIV, Malaria, Yellow Fever, Typhoid, Meningitis, Rabies

- 3 Fistulas and congenital anomalies are also common in Guinea. Research and create an information pamphlet for either one. Include:
 - Key facts
 - Causes and risk factors
 - Prevalence in sub-Saharan Africa
 - Prevention
 You can begin your research at the following sites:
 Fistulas: <http://www.fistulafoundation.org/whatisfistula/>
 Congenital anomalies: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs370/en/>



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VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Since 1990, Mercy Ships has conducted thirty-eight field services in ten African nations, delivering health care at no charge and partnering with local governments to help improve the capacity of national health care systems.

The Surgery Ship focuses on a field service to Guinea and allows viewers to witness firsthand the incredible work of the volunteers and the impact they have on patients' lives.

During viewing, students are to complete the tables on the following page.

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Students can complete the following reflective tasks with reference to the notes they took while viewing the documentary:

1

YAYA

- Which parts of Yaya's story most affected you and why?
- Why do you think Dan developed such a deep connection with Yaya?

- Are you hopeful for Yaya's future?

2

MAIMUNA

- Which parts of Maimuna's story most affected you and why?
- Why do you think Nerida developed such a deep connection with Maimuna?
- Are you hopeful for Maimuna's future?

3

AMADOU

- Which parts of Amadou's story most affected you and why?
- Why wasn't surgery an option for Amadou?

4

Consider the three patients we followed – which patient's story had the greatest impact on you and why?

5

Why did Nerida and Neil each move into the world of medicine?

1: Deb Loudon takes a moment to play and blow bubbles with Hawa, one of the young patients in her care 2: Although not a perfect outcome for Maimuna, she slowly came to be happy with the result from the surgery 3: Baby Amadou has been diagnosed with a malignant tumour, which means Dr Neil cannot operate 4-5: Yaya suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta, or 'brittle bone' disease. Though his legs have suffered multiple fractures, he is incredibly lucky to have outgrown the disease and will be able to be healed. Pre- and post-op. 6: Nick says goodbye to a patient

6

Consider Nerida's observation: 'The patients that we see in Africa ... you've got [some] where their skin is so malnourished that half of [their faces] rots off. And then just a plane trip away you have thousands of people that just want to be a little bit skinnier, have just a little bit more augmented breasts. I just ... it's really too much if you try and think about it.'

- How do you think Nerida copes with this contrast in her working life?

PATIENT STORIES

PATIENT	ILLNESS	TREATMENT ON THE SHIP	OUTCOME
<i>Yaya</i> (young boy with leg abnormalities)			
<i>Maimuna</i> (thirteen-year-old girl with a benign face tumour)			
<i>Amadou</i> (two-year-old boy with a fast-growing mouth tumour)			

VOLUNTEER STORIES

VOLUNTEER	ROLE THEY PLAY ON THE SHIP	CONNECTION TO SPECIFIC PATIENTS
<i>Dr Nerida Butcher</i> (Surgeon)		
<i>Dr Neil Thomson</i> (Surgeon)		
<i>Dan Bergman</i> (ICU Nurse & Staff Manager)		
<i>Nick Veltjens</i> (Physiotherapist)		



1



2

- Think about your own (or a family member's) experiences with accessing health care in Australia. Reflect on specific instances – the doctors/specialists you were seen by, how long it took you to access treatment, the cost, the conditions where you were treated (hospital or clinic), the follow-up care you received. How do you feel when you compare this experience to the level of basic health care available in Guinea?

Creative Writing Tasks

- Write a series of diary entries from Maimuna while she is on board the ship. Ensure you include detail of her hopes, her fears, her initial reactions to her surgery, her relationship with Nerida and her growing happiness with the outcome.
- Write a letter from Yaya to Dan one year after his surgery. Include reference to his life pre- and post-surgery and his hopes and fears for the future.
- Write a series of diary entries for any of Nerida, Dan or Neil during their time on the ship. Include details about the surgeries they are involved in, their relationships with the patients, the contrast of life on board the ship and back in Australia and their feelings about leaving Guinea for the next port.



3

the everyday heroism of both Africans and the volunteers and the human drive to rise above circumstances, to survive, and give the best of ourselves – even when there seems no end in sight. At its heart, this is a positive film; in it we see people as active agents in the broader world arena – people who are seeking to make a difference. It is an outward-looking story about how we can engage with the world.'

When you consider that the ship completed 2783 successful surgeries while in Guinea, it is indeed evident that those working onboard really do make a difference.

Visit the following website: <http://www.volunteering.com.au/tools_and_research/volunteering_statistics.asp>

- What are the general rates and patterns of volunteers in Australia?
- Have you undertaken volunteer work? If yes, in what capacity



4

1: Director Madeleine captures the celebrations as a patient returns home 2: Nerida, in between surgeries on the Africa Mercy 3: Nerida and Tertius operate on Maimuna, a difficult procedure that lasted several hours 4: Nick takes a moment to watch the sunset over the harbour, before returning to his post-op patients 5: Director, Madeleine captures the recovery of some of the patients



5

and what did you gain from the experience?

- Do you think you could undertake volunteer work like those on board this ship?

Visit Mercy Ships' website at <<http://www.mercyships.org.au>>.

- Complete a one-page profile of this organisation, including details about their mission, their programs and the ways in which people can become involved as volunteers.
- Do you think you could volunteer on board a ship like 'Africa Mercy'? Explain your response.

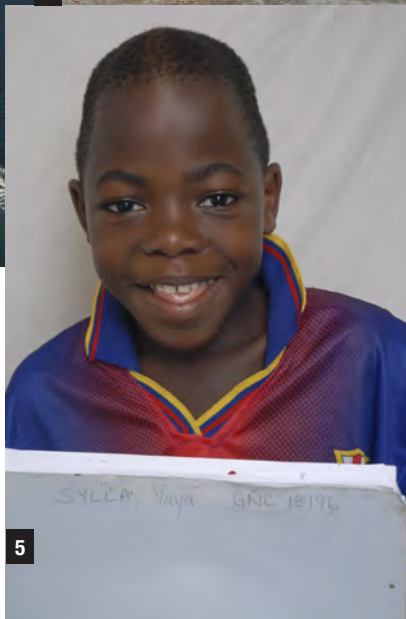
Volunteering

The Surgery Ship director, Madeleine Hetherington, has this to say about the film:

'Despite these complicated issues, *The Surgery Ship* is also a story about



1: Nick and medical staff farewell a patient
2: Animata waits with her sister for the car, which will take them back to their village, after the success of Maimuna's surgery 3: The Africa Mercy sails into the port of Conakry, in the West African nation of Guinea 4: Nick says goodbye to a patient 5: Yaya



- Create a promotional clip or PowerPoint recruiting volunteers for Mercy Ships. Include information about what life is like on board the ships, the types of roles available, how to sign up and a case study of a patient treated by the ship.

The following site provides useful research when creating your recruitment campaign: <<http://volunteer.mercyships.org/volunteer/what-its-like/>>.

- 3 Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4 Reduce child mortality
- 5 Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability

Visit the following website: <<http://www.one.org/c/us/policybrief/3507/>>

Improving health in Africa

As well as providing surgery and health-care, Mercy Ships are actively involved in empowering local communities to achieve long-term health improvements via programs such as rehabilitation, small-business assistance, community health education, medical skills training and assistance with agriculture, clean water and sanitation and construction.

In 2000, the United Nations agreed on seven millennium development goals (MDGs) for developing countries (to be achieved by 2015). The seven goals were:

- 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2 Achieve universal primary education

- Write a paragraph summary on how Africa is tracking in relation to each of the seven MDGs.
- It has been argued that sustainable improvements in health in Africa require tackling the root causes of poverty, including the global economic order and corruption. The international community can help this by making trade fairer and limiting the arms trade.
- Write an essay exploring the African health crisis. Ensure your essay includes the following information:
 - Why is the health of people in Africa so poor?
 - Global health initiatives to tackle the crisis
 - Reference to the seven MDGs and how close Africa is to achieving these goals
 - The impact of fair trade on the situation

- The importance of creating a strong and sustainable local health care community in African nations
- In your conclusion, state whether you think the MDGs will be achieved in Africa by 2015 and what methods and programmes you feel are most effective in terms of achieving long-term improvements in the health of Africans.

The following sites will be useful when researching your essay:

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/mdg/mdg-reports/africa-collection/>
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>
<http://www.bmj.com/content/331/7519/755/>
<http://www.one.org/c/us/policybrief/3507/>



Deb Loudon takes a moment to play and blow bubbles with Hawa, one of the young patients in her care.

<http://www.thesurgeryship.com>



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