

Volunteer surgeon: I rebuild people's faces and their lives

The floating hospital and its volunteers bring hope to people without medical access in West Africa who have been ostracised by their communities



Leo Cheng says volunteering on Mercy Ships can be emotionally challenging.

Leo Cheng

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It was about 15 years ago that I first heard about [Mercy Ships, the world's largest non-governmental floating hospital](#). Staffed almost entirely by volunteers, the charity is committed to alleviating human suffering by bringing world class surgical and community services to the poorest of the poor in West Africa and across the world.

Back then, I had just started my first consultant job in the UK, working as an oral maxillofacial reconstructive surgeon in Cambridge. One day, Lord Ian McColl, then a trustee and surgeon on board the ship, and his late wife Jean, came to our church to talk about Mercy Ships and show us before and after pictures of some of the people they had treated.

Several years later, I was fortunate enough to be invited to visit the ship, as a guest of Lord and Lady McColl. That first trip changed my life. I realised that the western world has given me an amazing gift and I could use it to help people: patients who are really desperate. Having a lump or deformity isn't just a physical trauma for them – these people were ostracised, driven away by their own families and community. This is why every year for the last 12 years, I have spent two weeks of my annual leave volunteering on the ship.

In the ship's operating theatres, I use my skills as a specialist maxillofacial, thyroid and reconstructive surgeon. My patients are children and adults with large tumours, cleft lips and

war wounds. Many of them have never had access to medical care and are trapped behind their facial tumours. Some have been living as social outcasts for years, and I've heard of children being abandoned or worse. We know that some villages bury babies alive because they've got a cleft lip and the voodoo doctor says, "That's a demon baby".

I remember one male patient who had a benign lower jaw tumour. It started growing slowly (because it's benign it doesn't spread to other parts of the body) so it had been getting bigger for six or seven years. He had been living in a cattle shed and the family had kicked him out. When he approached a bar or a public place like a park, people would throw stones at him because they thought he was cursed.

When he came to the ship, I removed the tumour and reconstructed his jaw with titanium metal. When he woke up, we gave him a mirror and he said: "That's not me". Some patients require me or the nurse to hold their hands and move them towards the new line of their face. They have to keep looking back and checking that the tumour is still gone.

Another patient came to me with a cleft lip and palate. She was over 60 and when I saw her before surgery she could not look me in the eyes. She was ostracised and was living in a hut outside the village. She couldn't work, she couldn't buy things from the market. She looked in the mirror after surgery and couldn't believe it. When I saw her the next day, she looked at me, right in the eye, and there was a light in her eyes. She smiled. She knew she'd got a second chance at life.

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There are around 450 volunteers on the ship, of which a third are nurses doctors, dentists, surgeons. The rest are plumbers, teachers – you name it, we've got it.

I'd like to finish by sharing a story that one of my patients told me after his surgery. He had attended one of the ship's assessment days. Mercy Ships often uses multi-storey buildings or football stadiums for these assessments because of the sheer volume of people, often more than 7,000.

He came to the assessment day to seek treatment for an infected benign tumour. He had to contain it with a plastic bag. The smell was awful. He said when he was queuing, all the people around him were walking away, because of the smell and the flies landing on the plastic bag. He thought, "Look at the people around me – they're running away. There's no hope for me." When he turned around and started walking away, he was tapped on the shoulder by a Mercy Ships worker, who said to him, "You will be seen very soon, you are the reason we are here."

"I hadn't been touched for the last 20 years by another human being," he told me. The healing process is about so much more than surgery – it begins with human contact and acceptance.

[Volunteering](#) with Mercy Ships can be emotionally challenging, but when things get tough, this quote from Edward Everett Hale never fails to lift me up: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something."