

The ship that saves lives

How a family from Chingford are using their skills to make a difference

by Sophie Watson

It's definitely not your typical family holiday.

This new year the Cheng family, from Chingford, are travelling to Benin to spend two weeks volunteering on board the world's largest floating hospital.

Dr Leo Cheng, Hilary Cheng, and their two daughters Kat and Zoe Cheng, are volunteers with Mercy Ships, a charity that provides ships offering free healthcare and humanitarian aid to some of the poorest countries in Africa. Since the charity's creation in 1978, it has helped more than 2.5 million people.

For Dr Cheng, a head and neck surgeon at St Bartholomew's, The Royal London and Homerton hospitals, this is the 14th time he has volunteered with Mercy Ships. Only recently has his family also started to join him, this year being their second visit.

Each day Dr Cheng is likely to perform two or three surgeries on patients who have never received any kind of healthcare. His patients suffer problems including thyroid, head and neck tumours, and serious wounds.

Hilary will be serving as a chaplain for the patients on board,



The Cheng family prepare to board the Africa Mercy floating hospital. Credit: Ruben Plomp

supporting them through their life-changing journeys and providing them with spiritual guidance. Kat will be serving as a nurse and Zoe in hospitality.

Dr Cheng said: "It is such a privilege to serve on the Africa Mercy with my family again. When we deliver hope and healing to those desperate patients and their loved ones, we also receive far more through the grace, patience and gratitude from those we serve.

"Our culture tells us to acquire

more and more for personal gain but on the Africa Mercy, the volunteers find purpose in their lives by serving others."

Every Mercy Ships volunteer pays to be on the ship, meaning that the Chengs are financing their own travel and accommodation, and all other expenses involved in spending time on board.

As a result of Mercy Ships' unique business model, all donations made to the charity go straight to patient care and maintaining the



Hilary with a patient. Credit: Michelle Murrey

hospital ship.

Kat added: "Returning to the Africa Mercy is like going to my second home. Now I am further on in my nursing career, I have a greater understanding and appreciation for the life changing care that is delivered by each and every volunteer on board and I strive to make a positive difference to the lives of those I meet in Benin."

With a crew of more than 400 professional volunteers from more than 40 nations, many of whom

are from the UK, volunteers on the Africa Mercy are currently helping deliver and support the provision of free medical services to Benin's population of around ten million, in addition to carrying out mentoring and training programmes.

For more information about Mercy Ships:

Visit mercyships.org.uk