



# Out of Africa

This time last year, audiologist **Gemma Twitchen** took time out from her role here to volunteer for the charity, Sound Seekers, in pushing audiology services forward

I've been home for a week since volunteering as an audiologist in Africa and I'm in hospital - thanking my lucky stars that I'm home, and not where I've been for the past six months. The timing has been impeccable. I've been surrounded by healthcare professionals trying to figure out what's wrong with me and I will now have treatment for life. I feel awful for thinking it but, having witnessed some of things I did within healthcare in Zambia, I'm fairly sure the outcome would've been very different had I still been there.

Healthcare is a basic human right that everyone should have equal access to - regardless of where they're born. It sounds so obvious; but we all know it's far from true. Quite simply, we're lucky to live in a country where we have access to such a good, national, health service.

So why is this relevant for a magazine about hearing loss, you may wonder? Well, my own experience aside, I've also worked as an audiologist for 12 years in the NHS and charity sector. And now, more than ever, it seems like we need to

make even more noise about why audiology services are so important.

### A very different picture

Just as I was leaving for Zambia, Action on Hearing Loss started a significant campaign to stop a Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in North Staffordshire from limiting free NHS hearing aids in the area. It felt like we were taking a giant step backwards, in having to argue how having a hearing loss can affect someone's quality of life.

Early diagnosis, and having access to life-enhancing hearing aids, treatment and support is crucial in managing the challenges of hearing loss. When I landed in Zambia, in an area where there's virtually no audiology provision, I wished I could have flown the CCG over, to demonstrate just how detrimental it is not to have such a service.

The picture in Africa is very different to here. There's almost no audiology provision across most of the continent - which is shocking, considering the



Population

**16m**

Audiologists

**1**

prevalence of hearing loss. I met so many people who'd had a hearing loss for a long time but no support; no access to hearing aids, or technology such as cochlear implants, or deaf schools. It was a daily occurrence to meet young adults whose hearing was completely wiped out by something like meningitis - and there was little I could do to help. I had to find a way to learn how to break the news of profound hearing loss without the back up of a support network, treatment options and information. How would these people manage to stay in school, or work; would they be treated badly, or be taken advantage of, due to their deafness? Sadly, I knew the reality was not going to be good in most cases.

After spending time in Zambia, I realised that positive changes wouldn't happen overnight. Which is why the few people on the ground trying to make a difference (along with aid from abroad), are so important in developing this area and, ultimately, helping to keep people in education and work.

I was lucky enough to be posted with Dr Alfred Mwamba, the only audiologist in Zambia - which has a population of 16 million. As you can imagine, he's a busy man. I started work the day after I arrived - a Sunday. By the end of the morning session, we'd seen more than 100 people for their first hearing assessment. I'll never complain about working in a 'busy' clinic in the UK again...



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For more details of the organisation and its work, go to: [www.sound-seekers.org.uk](http://www.sound-seekers.org.uk)

Read more about Gemma's experiences in Africa in our next issue.