



A HOSPITAL HAS LANDED

Flying around the world, these volunteers bring hope to people in danger of losing their eyesight

BY EUGENE COSTELLO

*Nurse Ann-Marie Ablett
and Dr. Lawrence
Azavedo in the plane's
prep room with their
young patient, Bold-
Erdene Ganbold.*

It is a baking hot late-July morning. On the cracked concrete freight runway of Ulaanbaatar airport, Mongolia, weeds force their way up. Near the cargo hangar is a white DC-10 plane, with a swoosh of baby blue on its tail, and the logo of eye charity Orbis—the initial 'O' is made to look like an eye, fittingly. This is what is called the Flying Eye Hospital: it is staffed almost entirely by volunteers from around the world who give up time to bring their skills to poorer parts of the world in order to stem the rise of preventable blindness.

Standing at the top of the stairs to the plane is veteran volunteer scrub nurse Ann-Marie Ablett; that is, the nurse who acts as the surgeon's right hand during operations and procedures.

Originally from County Roscommon, Ireland, with a gentle and lilting brogue, Ann-Marie is softly-spoken and, as she looks up from beneath her brown fringe, it is hard to believe that she is 61. Her 'day job', as she puts it, is as clinical lead nurse in ophthalmology at the University of Wales in Cardiff. She adds that this, almost incredibly, will be her 28th voluntary assignment with Orbis in just 12 years. It's an odyssey in which she has spanned 13 countries across three continents, seen more than 1,000 patients and trained thousands of nurses and healthcare professionals. For her, it is the most joyous thing in her life: "When I go on a programme it puts a smile on my face which lasts until I go on the next one," she says, laughing.

A boy of ten is walking confidently towards the plane hand-in-hand with his mother, an attractive woman dressed Western style. He has Mongolian good looks, with a mop of black hair; it is only as he approaches the plane that it becomes clear his left eye is almost wholly shut. For young Bold-Erdene Ganbold, this is a lucky break; the day before, he had been selected for surgery by the Orbis team at a screening day at a hospital in the sprawling city. Without the specialist surgery they can provide, he would suffer continuous degradation of his sight and run the risk of blindness in one eye from the condition called ptosis, a drooping of the eyelid.

To make matters more urgent, he has an abscess in that same eye, caused by a playground fight some months before; the same incident has caused post-trauma scarring tissue, endangering his sight yet further.

Ann-Marie had met Bold-Erdene at



Young Bold-Erdene was fortunate — he was selected for surgery that would prevent him from becoming blind in one eye.

the screening, where an enthusiastic Mongolian staff had marshalled as many cases as possible for the Orbis team to consider. The corridors were packed with families who had brought their children and other family members —some from hundreds of miles away—in the hope that they would be selected for operation on the Flying Eye Hospital. Inevitably, there would be heartbreak, but Orbis has two main criteria for selection. First, that the case must afford good potential for teaching surgical techniques to local medical staff. Legacy is at the heart of the Orbis ethos. The second is that the surgeon must be reasonably confident of achieving a positive outcome—false hope serves no one.

But today is a day of procedures and surgery for the chosen ones.

Ann-Marie greets Bold-Erdene, whose face lights up on recognizing her, and takes him by the hand as she gives him and his mother a tour of the plane.

Up front, in what would once have been the first-class section, is the lecture theater with ten rows of seats and a large monitor upon which local medical staff can watch expert surgeons carry out operations as they explain what they are doing. Today it is packed with 48 attendees, some obliged to stand up at the back, and interpreters at hand to translate any questions they wish to put to the surgeon as he works.



Ann-Marie and colleagues wheel Bold-Erdene along from the plane's prep and recovery room at the rear of the plane forward to the operating room, where surgeon Dr. Yasser Kahn awaits him.

Moving towards the middle of the plane along the narrow gangway that runs its length, Ann-Marie points out a large room called the laser room that also doubles as a waiting area for patients and family; this is where Bold-Erdene will sit with his mother until he is called to pre-op for his surgery. Next is the operating theatre, a hermetically sealed sterile room, with a gurney in the centre and overhead lamps to shine upon the patient. It is small; with the surgeon, plus Ann-Marie and three local nursing students, it will be cramped. Between the operat-

ing and the recovery rooms is a small space used for sterilizing instruments and scrubbing hands before surgery.

Beyond that, at the rear of the plane, is a small ward with three beds that serves both as pre- and post-op; here staff nurse Angela Purcell is joking with lead anaesthetist Jonathan Lord from London's Moorfields Eye Hospital and his colleague anaesthetist Lawrence Azavedo, from Preston, England. This is a happy and motivated team, with all volunteers and staff proud of the pioneering work that they do.

For now, Bold-Erdene and his mum

must wait in the laser clinic, where the boy sits watching *Frozen* on the DVD player; it is his favourite, he explains shyly.

Ann-Marie must go and scrub up in pre-op to assist surgeon Yasser Khan on the first of four operations slated for this morning. Bold-Erdene is second in line. After 45 minutes, she returns to the laser clinic, the first treatment having been a success.

She smiles at Bold-Erdene and ruffles his tousled hair. "Ready, little man?"

Bold-Erdene smiles back and takes Ann-Marie's hand to set off for pre-op at the far end of the plane.

Walking into the brightly lit room, she introduces him to anaesthetist Lawrence; he takes Bold-Erdene's hand while Ann-Marie moves on into the operating room.

With a gentle tug on the hand from Lawrence, the little boy climbs up on to the gurney and lets Lawrence pull a blanket over him.

"I believe you're a fan of *Frozen*," says Lawrence. "Which song is your favourite?"

With a shy smile, the boy says that it is 'Let it Go' and offers to sing it.

As he launches into a note-perfect rendition of the hit song, with a rapt audience of seasoned medical professionals utterly charmed by his performance, Lawrence takes the opportunity to inject a little pre-med into a vein in the back of the boy's hand—"just a little something to help you feel calm."

At the end of the first verse and chorus, the staff members break into applause, while Lawrence asks Bold-Erdene what he wants to do when he grows up. "I would like to sing on stage in musicals," he says simply.

At Lawrence's request, he sets out on the second verse of the song; as he sings, Lawrence gently eases a measure of anesthetic into the back of his hand. The voice tails off; he is under.



IN THE OPERATING ROOM, A BRIGHT OVERHEAD LIGHT SHINES ON BOLD-ERDENE'S FACE AS HE LIES ON THE GURNEY.

The team wheel the gurney to the doors of the low-lit operating theatre; a masked Ann-Marie takes the other end and pulls it though the doors that close firmly to ensure a sterile operating environment.

Surgeon Yasser Khan from Toronto, Canada, sits by the gurney, with Ann-Marie to his side and three Mongolian nurses watching at close hand. The overhead lamp shines brightly on Bold-Erdene's face.

Yasser Khan fits the profile of a volunteer Orbis surgeon well—he is an exceptionally well-qualified ophthalmic surgeon who specializes in



Post operation - a very happy Bold-Erdene with his mother a day after the successful surgery to repair his left eye.

corrective or reconstructive surgery following trauma. As well as having his own practice, he is the director of the Oculo-plastic surgery fellowship programme at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Yasser sits hunched over the boy's face, peering intently and talking as he goes; he is on close-up screen to the 48 medical students in the lecture theatre. Ann-Marie is to his left passing him instruments as and when he holds his hand out for them, anticipating what he will want.

Yasser explains to camera that he has diagnosed a further complication

to add to this brave little boy's litany of eye problems—a blocked tear duct. If the tear duct is not unblocked Bold-Erdene will continue to suffer from excessive amounts of tears exposing him to a risk of infections and possible vision loss. In his gentle and measured manner, he points out that fixing this is not the primary purpose of today's surgery. However, since he is "going in" anyway, he says, "I might as well do it."

This is not for the squeamish; the screen focuses close up on the eye, where Yasser makes an incision causing blood to spurt out and white fat to ooze from the opening.

Over the next hour, the surgeon patiently describes what he is doing; the congenital ptosis has been made far worse by the post-trauma scar tissue, which is more extensive than he had feared. Nevertheless, he remains unfazed as he deftly works away.

Yasser points to a gap between eye and lid where Bold-Erdene has lost a lot of fat and tissue, which he must attend to before correcting the droop. Finally, he is able to focus on the primary purpose of the surgery—correcting the ptosis by adjusting and strengthening a supporting muscle. He turns to Ann-Marie with a smile, and says, "OK, we're done here. It's a good outcome."

Bold-Erdene is wheeled back into the little ward, and Anne-Marie removes her mask and sits by the side of his bed. After 20 minutes or so, he begins to come round, and Ann-Marie asks for someone to fetch his mother; as she reaches the ward, he is now awake and sitting up, holding Ann-Marie's hand. His mother heads straight to him; wordlessly, they em-

brace.

After 20 minutes or so, he is ready to set off for his overnight stay back at the city hospital, where Yasser Khan will see him the following morning. Ann-Marie walks him down the stairs off the plane. When they reach the cargo hangar, he stops to give her a final hug. He and his mother will now be driven back to the hospital. It is one more routine operation for Ann-Marie and the Orbis team, but a life-changing one for this young boy and his family.

Can Ann-Marie sum up what drives her to undertake so many assignments unpaid? She considers, then says, "You know, I'm from the west of Ireland, a tiny place called Boyle. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I'd have the opportunity to fly all over the world using my skills to bring so much happiness to many people and changing lives for generations to come."

She then heads back up the steps of the plane. There's still a full day of operations ahead, after all. ■