

When GTC Fellow Chris Bulstrode watches the news these days, there is usually at least one item which brings the memories flooding back. Over the last four years, he has worked in Afghanistan, Gaza and then Haiti in the aftermath of last January's devastating earthquake. The experience gained on his first job working in a refugee camp in Sudan when he first qualified as a doctor thirty years ago, is now coming in useful.

So what was the impetus for this 56-year-old committed pacifist to sign up with the Territorial Army and then start volunteering for Third World service after so many years?

"It all started one evening about four years ago, when I returned from a long day at the General Medical Council," he says. "I had sat down to eat and was grumbling at the futility of committee work."

His wife Vicky had clearly heard enough of this. "I had not thought that she was even listening, but quite suddenly she pointed out that if I felt that I was no good at this kind of work, I should do something I was good at and stop moaning! The annoying thing was that she was right!"

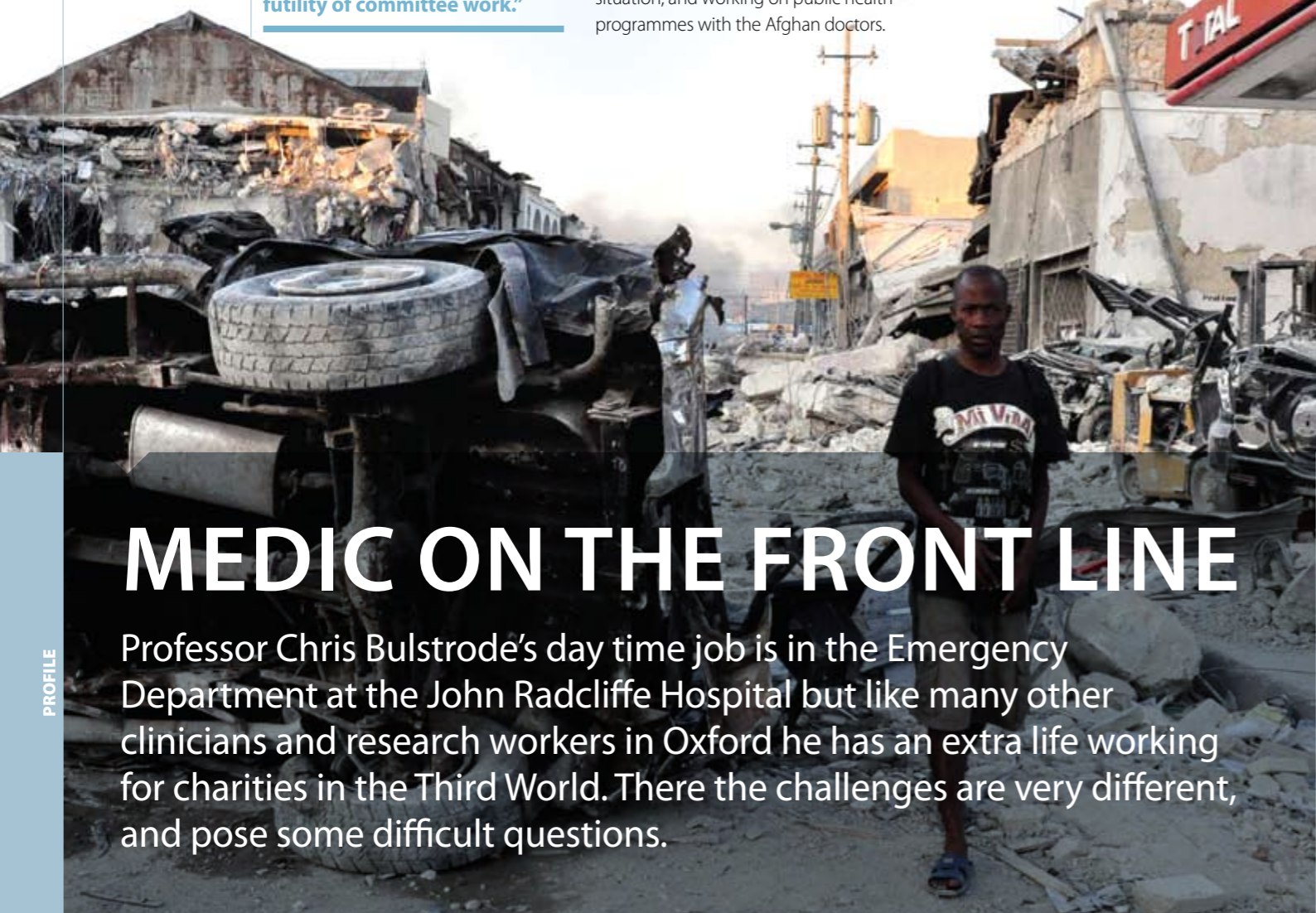
They sat down over a bottle of wine and Chris wrote a list of what he liked and did not like doing. "I could see no pattern but Vicky said that it was obvious – I needed to join the TA so that I could work in the Third World in a secure environment. I was horrified, as the last thing I thought that I wanted to do was be a soldier, but she challenged me to ring the Army the next day, so I did."

Within weeks Chris found himself at Sandhurst being trained for army service, and not long after that he was in Helmand Province in Afghanistan, first as a casualty officer then out in the front line assessing the refugee situation, and working on public health programmes with the Afghan doctors.

He was supposed to work in the field hospital for six weeks but stayed for three months as there was no replacement. Then, instead of returning home, he was again asked to stay on. The allied forces were about to invade Musa Qala and needed his previous experience of working with refugees in the Sudan in the 1980s. The University kindly gave him a sabbatical to enable him to do this.

Working in Musa Qala and then Sangin was the real front line. "Currently I suspect that it is one of the most dangerous places on earth. For the first time I had to carry a live weapon and racks of ammunition. My rucksack was so heavy that I needed help to stand-up with it on my back." He went on foot patrols with the Gurkhas and was petrified, having to cock his weapon for the first time. "The Gurkhas were astounding professionals. They circled and pirouetted all the time, guarding us against sniper or bomb attack. It was a real privilege to work

Photo: Philippe Cottin, Doctors of the World



MEDIC ON THE FRONT LINE

Professor Chris Bulstrode's day time job is in the Emergency Department at the John Radcliffe Hospital but like many other clinicians and research workers in Oxford he has an extra life working for charities in the Third World. There the challenges are very different, and pose some difficult questions.

with them at such close quarters, and I have absolutely no doubt that their professionalism made my life much, much safer."

He worked in the field for a further three months in the green belt with stints in Lashkar Gar, Geresk, and Sangin helping to set up clinics and putting in place education for women and children.

When Chris returned home, he knew he had changed a little but Vicky found the changes even more profound. Initially he suffered from terrible nightmares. The first car he came across travelling towards him on the open road found him on the floor of the car in the passenger footwell – a car travelling that fast could only be a suicide bomber he reasoned. He had developed a previously unknown passion for order: he had to know exactly where his watch and wallet were before he turned off the light at night in case of a mortar attack. They were "crazy things," he says, "but for six months it had been drummed into me that everything had to be ready for action at a moment's notice, day or night."

At work, it was difficult to be patient with the trivial injuries and some of the more unreasonable demands of drunk patients in the Emergency Department. "I had to keep reminding myself that this was a very different environment from the field hospital where every case was a matter of life and death. But it was hard to get to grips with how spoilt we are in terms of healthcare and how most people take these things for granted," he admits.

Although glad to be home, he missed the wildness and excitement of Afghanistan. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he found the UK 'tame' and soon got itchy feet.

Chris was then approached by Doctors of the World, the English arm of Medecins du Monde (MdM), a French non-governmental organisation specialising in help in difficult areas of the world. They were looking for a surgeon to go to Gaza one year after the Intifada. The plan was to help a local surgeon reconstruct limbs. Chris's languages learnt years ago would be put to full use as the surgeon spoke only Arabic while the MdM staff spoke only French.

Using his annual leave, he arrived to find that it was clear the surgeon had a completely different view of why he was there and the situation was going to have to be managed with tact. It was also a political and security nightmare, with Hamas holding hostages. At times he felt that even he was being eyed up as a potential hostage.

Soon after his return from Gaza, Doctors of the World contacted him again, this time to go to Haiti following the earthquake in January this year. He had just eight hours to pack.

Chris spent three weeks operating from dawn to dusk in a small room with two couches as operating tables. He and a colleague performed 500

operations during that time. "It was like a conveyor belt: as soon as one operation was finished, the patient was moved and another stretcher took their place," Chris recalls.

His stay proved to be a poignant lesson for Chris, who believes that Haiti is now 'aid addicted'. On his one day off, he visited the mountain clinics with a colleague and while there, three male camp leaders asked them to dig latrines for the camp before the rains came.

"It demonstrates the fact that if they need something, Haitians ask an aid agency to get it. They have, in many cases, lost the will to do things for themselves. This attitude is aided by the NGOs who themselves thrive in an environment where there appears to be need. So, while NGOs talk about empowering the local people, some are in fact doing the exact opposite. Our Western generosity in terms of money and aid can do more harm than good."

So what's next? Doctors of the World have invited him to Bangladesh but he's not sure if his medical expertise will be of use. However, despite the danger, he would love to return to Afghanistan to carry on the work with the education of women and children.

"The last few years have been a bewildering and extraordinary time for me in terms of the experiences I've had. Working in areas where history is being made has allowed me to reflect – what does this mean and what will the history books say about it? It's been incredibly exciting and also it's a huge privilege to be asked."

← Haitian capital Port-au-Prince was devastated by the January earthquake

→ In Haiti Chris performed operations from dawn until dusk

Far right: Chris spent three months working in the field hospital at Camp Bastion



Photo: Philippe Cottin, Doctors of the World