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Bankstown doctor sets sail to Africa

Bankstown-Lidcombe Hospital's Professor Christophe Berney volunteers his spare time on the Mercy Ship so he can provide free health care to people living in dire circumstances off the coast of West Africa.

The Laparoscopic Gastrointestinal and Hernia Surgeon said "I offered my time, surgical expertise, love and compassion to those in need, but I received even more from them in terms of heartfelt appreciation and recognition for my work."

"When you give to others unconditionally, you receive even more with an incredible sense of happiness, self-gratification and contentment. Giving is undoubtedly extremely nurturing," he said.

Confronted by limited local resources, sparse staff and deadly illnesses that most doctors only read about in textbooks, Prof Berney took the experience he'd gained from Bankstown-Lidcombe Hospital onto the Mercy Ship and worked with the team to make plenty of tough decisions.

"We try to treat as many people as we can but there are so many people who need our help and because of that, we have to prioritise those who need urgent care.

"We see people who are outcast from their communities because of facial disfigurements and others who, because of poverty, and societal inequality, can't afford even the most basic healthcare."

The vessel has X-ray facilities, a CT-scan, a pharmacy and a lab that Prof Berney said is crucial to remotely treating patients.

"The most commonly performed surgeries on board were treating large facial tumours, including massive goitres, as well as orthopaedic corrections in children with lower limbs rickets and other bone deformities caused by vitamin D deficiency," Prof Berney said.

"The great thing is that we, as volunteers, all pull together as a team and do what we can for the patients.

"We are lucky in Australia and often take so many things for granted, as we do with readily available medicines and healthcare services, or access to clean drinking water which enables us to lead healthy lives."

Prof Berney said all medical and non-medical volunteers pay their own way to the ship and a fee to be on board but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"It has been an incredible privilege and I felt blessed spending such precious time over there".

"I plan on going back again on board the Africa Mercy Ship next year. Volunteering is something I intend to be involved in for the rest of my surgical professional life," he said.