

Dear Tesfa friends!

I am now back in Norway after a special trip to Ethiopia. Special, because we have had record numbers of team members participating at this Tesfa mission trip! For the first two weeks we were in Addis, which I have written about in a previous letter.

In Addis I felt most things were going smoothly, I did several major operations and, among other things, was involved in doing the first keyhole surgical rectal amputation for rectal cancer at Black Lion Hospital and probably in Ethiopia. It is a milestone after we have worked for 11 years together with Black Lion to develop cancer surgery and keyhole surgery. Earlier this year, keyhole surgery for right-sided bowel cancer was performed at Black Lion with all Ethiopian surgeons. It's huge achievement, and proves that our effort matters! The operations are carried out with instruments donated by Tesfa, paid for by supporters - THANK YOU for your support!

In Addis, I was also able to resume collaboration with St. Paul. They now have five doctors who will become colorectal surgeons at the Black Lion and four at St. Paul. We, as external experts from Tesfa Foundation, help train them. In this way, we are helping to train future colorectal surgeons in Ethiopia. It is important work, which we also informed the Minister of Health's office. They were very positive and we were promised support.



Ingeborg and I are visiting the Ministry of Health

Then we traveled to Soddo. This time the team was too big to go all in the hospital van, so Ingeborg, Veronika and I drove in the Tesfa car. The trip takes the whole day, we left early in the morning and arrived late in the afternoon.

In Addis, I mostly operated colorectal surgery and anoproctology as I do home in Norway. In Soddo, we operate everything that is necessary on patients admitted to the surgical department. In Soddo we are really acting like the true general surgeons. It is something that I find challenging and exciting and something that I was looking forward to show the other Tesfa team members.



*Soddo, view from the guesthouse towards the hospital.
Mount Damota (2750 meters above sealevel) in the back*

One of the things that is important to us is to walk alongside the local doctors, both Ethiopians and foreigners, and share their burdens. After my experience being the only surgeon in Jinka, I know how important it is to regain strength and to get time with the family, when facing challenges that a general surgeon encounters in rural Ethiopia.

I started by taking most of the on call duties.

Patients from all over southern Ethiopia and from neighboring countries are admitted to the ward. The hospital in Soddo is becoming more and more a reference center for general surgery, as it has been for orthopedic surgery for many years. A large new OR building is also being built with 8 operating theaters + a trauma room will soon be completed. A new intensive care unit will also be built.

A visit to the ward starts with a word from the Bible and prayer, then we go from room to room, while the residents present the patient. They have already had an early visit before the consultants arrive.

In one room lies a small boy with a language no one understands. He has been operated for a hydatid cyst. In another room lies a little girl with burns that has been skin grafted. This is where older men lie after prostate operations (all of which are carried out open, and the catheter is removed after day 3 - with very little bleeding). Here are patients after thyroidectomies, after laparoscopic gallbladder removal, and multiple head injuries - I'll get back to that.

In one room lies a young patient with pus and bowel contents flowing out of his abdomen. Tesfa means hope, the team made a wholehearted effort to give hope to this patient. But, sometimes, at home and abroad, it is not in human power to save life. It is hard to see how death creeps up on patients we think we could have saved at home.



We have hope

But, the world is not a fair place. Some have better access to health services than others. We cannot accept this, at Tesfa we are constantly working to be able to provide the best possible health care based with the resources available.

When you support our work, you are helping to provide better health care where it is needed most.



We can only comfort

In Amharic we say, "this is above us, only God can help now". It means that for humans it is too difficult, now it is up to God.

The team worked until the end in the hope of saving the patient's life, but it eventually became clear that it was not possible. Tesfa means hope, hope for health, but also hope for salvation. Openness to talk about faith is much greater in Africa than in Norway, in Ethiopia most people are Christian, Orthodox or Evangelical, while a large minority are Muslim. It is a great strength that we can talk together about this dimension of life and death.

At the last operation, we got to hold the patient's hand, while Christian hymns were played in the operating room. Then the anesthesia was given and the patient fell asleep. We operated, and the patient was transferred to the recovery room and the intensive care unit. Then death came. This patient had a Christian faith, we are allowed to believe that God took our patient to an eternal life without disease and pain.

Death can seem so meaningless to young people that we think, humanly speaking, should have been saved. As surgeons, we often fight death, sometimes we win - it feels good! Sometimes we lose - but in the end it is God who rules with life and death - it is not our task.

I've tried to see meaning in this patient's death, I can't. However, I see a comfort in the fact that we were able to demonstrate several advanced techniques which can later be used on other patients and which may save other patients' lives.

I mentioned that there were several head injuries, in fact over 20% of the operations I did in Soddo were due to head injuries. Those were traffic accidents, robberies and assaults. Some of the cases were clearly murder attempts, and resulted in several arrests.

Veronika and Ingeborg, our two Tesfa residents, assisted several head injury operations. Drill holes and craniotomies were made.



Sometimes this can be difficult, it can bleed from veins and arteries, these are not always easy to get access to inside the skull. One of the patients was bleeding quite heavily before we were able to stop the bleeding. We tried hydrogen peroxide, surgical and a bit of diathermy (it's better to have a fried brain than a dead brain). Finally we were able to stop the bleeding.

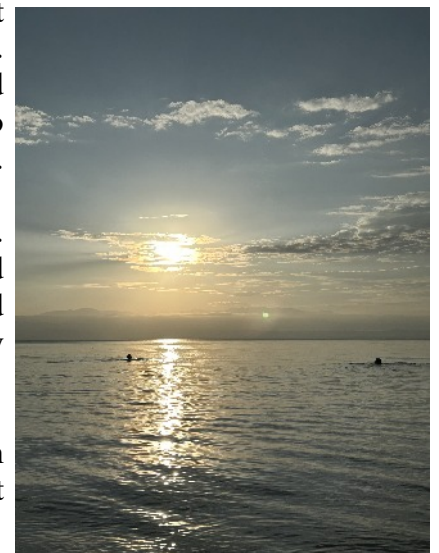


The last head injury was the worst. There were several cuts to the head and face, a crushed skull and damage deep inside the brain. We cleaned up the wounds, which included removing dead brain mass. Drill holes and craniotomy were made with a Gigli saw. The fractures were carefully set in place, a drain was inserted and as if by a miracle - the patient was discharged after a few days!

It is amazing to see how much a human body can withstand and still survive, while other times patients who we thought would survive, die. Again we see that God is the one who controls life and death.

A couple of days before we left, we had dinner with the Ethiopian doctors in Soddo. It's a great tradition that strengthens the bonds between us. Thanks to new and old friends! Veronika and Ingeborg had a fun quiz, and there was a lot of laughter and joy. It is nice that we can have a good community, even though there are many difficult patient meetings at the hospital.

We traveled to Addis via Langanu. Lake Langanu is one of the few places in Ethiopia where it is safe to swim without the risk of Schistosomiasis. We spent the night at a lodge, before going on to Addis the next day.



This trip was special, primarily because there were so many of us! At most we were 9 of us out, there have never been so many at a Tesfa mission trip before. I am looking forward to getting to know new Tesfa members and I am happy that the work of Tesfa is growing. For many years it has mostly been Olaf and I who have traveled, now more are coming. At the same time as we were in Ethiopia, Martin Böhler was also in Rwanda. It looks like we will manage to have regular visits to both Rwanda and Ethiopia in the future.

So I am humbled and proud that Tesfa has contributed to the first keyhole surgical rectal amputation at Black Lion and probably in Ethiopia. We have worked with Black Lion for 11 years, and now the keyhole surgery is starting to come - but it still requires several years of more visits before they become independent - and that is our goal.

The trip has also been a reminder of our limitations, we can do everything that is humanly possible - but in the end the hope of salvation is more important than the hope of health.

I have personally been strengthened in my vocation to be a surgeon for those in need in a resource limited setting - it is an exciting vocation that constantly takes me out of the comfort zone, out of the super-specialized surgical setting we operate in at home in Norway, and into the African general surgery - which is so exciting, and rewarding.

Thanks to everyone who joined the trip

Thanks to all of you at home who support us

Yours

Bjarte T Andersen

The patient stories have been anonymized to respect confidentiality. Patient stories may be made from several patient encounters.

Do you want to support our work!

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Thank you

