

Hearing aids for Nepal!

Thanks to the generous support of the companies Phonak, Audio-Service and Detax, it was possible for me to realise a long-cherished plan, namely fitting hearing aids in Nepal.

My name is Brigitte Weitkamp-Moog. I have been a hearing aid acoustician since 1978 and working independently since 1987.

Nepal is a place that means not only fantastic scenery, but also poverty and squalor. Nepal is twice the size of Bavaria, has approximately 27 million inhabitants and the majority of the country is completely undeveloped for transportation. With an average annual income of \$250 it is one of the world's poorest countries. There are only hospitals in the big cities and any treatment must be paid for in advance. However, Nepal is also a place that means open-minded, friendly, helpful and endearing people.

I had been to Nepal twice before on holiday with my husband. On both trips we came into contact with young people who were hard of hearing.

On the first occasion I took the defective hearing aid of our guide's nephew Pemba back with me and sent it to him repaired with a replacement hearing instrument, incidentally from Phonak. On the second occasion, I had the foresight to at least bring the moulding materials along with me, which came into use several times. I then sent the finished earpieces with hearing instruments back to Nepal by carrier.

From there it was not long before the idea of travelling to Nepal with full equipment and hearing aids arose.

This idea then became a reality a year and a half later in October 2007. The equipment and hearing aids weighed over 50 kg and included 50 hearing aids, moulding materials, 3500 size 13 batteries, a milling machine, two computers, a USB audiometer, a Hi-pro box and various small parts. We also brought along a few things to wear for good measure.

On behalf of the company Phonak, Mr. Wolfgang Bennedik donated 50 fully digital hearing aids of type Aero 311 Forte. From Ms. Juretzki-Mangold of the company Detax, we received the sponsorship of all of the moulding materials, and Mr. Fontes of the company Audioservice contributed a year's supply of batteries. Mr. Fritsch of the company ISMA loaned a MedRx A2D audiometer and a milling machine. We were able to gather all the other things from our own inventory.

The trip there went off almost without a hitch. The border customs had no interest whatsoever in our instruments.



Ronisch: the youngest patient in Dhulikhel

From the airport we wanted to continue immediately on to the hospital in Dhulikhel, where we would work for the next two weeks. Unfortunately the road was completely blocked with burning oil drums set ablaze by strikers. On the following morning, though, at six o'clock the street was clear again, as the strikers still slept, and we reached Dhulikhel.



and one of the older ones

By "we" I mean myself and my husband Detlef, an electrical engineer who was responsible for the following weeks for audiograms, technology and organisation.

Dhulikhel is a smaller city and approximately 30 km from Nepal's capital city Kathmandu.

The hospital in Dhulikhel (www.dhulikhelhospital.org/) was founded by Dr. Ram Shrestha in 1996 and is one of the few places in Nepal where poor people can receive medical care. Dr. Shrestha studied and worked in Austria before moving to Nepal. He returned with his Austrian wife and daughter of only a few months in order to fulfil his dream of founding a hospital in his hometown according to European standards.



Contact with the hospital was facilitated by the Deutsch-Nepalischen Hilfsgemeinschaft e.V. (German-Nepalese Aid Organisation) in Stuttgart (www.dnh-stuttgart.org/), where we have been members for some time.

The hospital had identified patients in advance who were promising candidates for a hearing aid, and screenings were done in different outposts as well as a school for the hearing impaired in Kathmandu. Other patients came through word-of-mouth advertising and the facilitation of our Nepalese friends.

We tended to approximately 40 patients in the hospital, 10 of which were children. My husband did approximately 100 audiograms. The children received, insofar as it made sense, two hearing aids. The adults received only one.

We used the Phonak Aero 311 forte with outstanding results for most patients with intermediate to severe hearing loss. For milder cases we had some used hearing aids with us.

The earpiece production with the Detax material was excellent.

The batteries were administered by the ENT department and given to the patients in small packages.

We were particularly well-supported in our work by the entire ENT department, led by Dr. Monika Pokharel, and by the ENT surgeon Dr. Kashi Raj Gyawali and his assistant Nabin, who performed voluntary operations in the hospital. Educating the ENT employees of the hospital was an additional goal, something with which Nabin made very good progress.



in Monjo (with assistant Pemba)

We reached our next destination, Lukla, in the Everest Region with a small propeller plane of the type Twin Otter, whose suitability for landing on very short landing strips in Lukla was absolutely necessary.

We were now travelling with lighter baggage, because most of the hearing aids and batteries were already handed out. Our job site was in Monjo, a half day's march from Lukla, in a very beautiful lodge that we were already familiar from our earlier stays.

Our assistant here was Pemba, a person with severe hearing impairment who had received a new hearing aid during our



Dhulikhel Hospital (from the left: ENT surgeon Dr. Kashi Raj Gyawali, Brigitte Weitkamp-Moog, Detlef Moog, Hospital founder and director Dr. Ram Shrestha)

first stay (see above). All of the patients came to us through word-of-mouth advertising and we were able to supply them with remaining hearing aids. Pemba also received a brand new Aero 311 forte and was very pleased. The procedure here was the same as in Dhulikhel. I did the moulds, earpieces and the adjustment and my husband did the audiograms.

The smaller service work and battery distribution here will be taken care of by Pemba.

Afterwards, we undertook another four-day hike and then flew back to Kathmandu after a half day of hearing aid adjustment in Lukla.

We spent the final two days of our trip training the employees in the hospital in Dhulikhel.



The second phase of the work began back at home. That is, enabling the setup of an audiological department for the adjustment of hearing aids in the Dhulikhel hospital.

A few articles appeared in the local newspapers for this purpose, calling for the donation of used, no-longer-needed hearing aids (see accompanying newspaper article).

Over the course of three months approximately 100 hearing aids were turned in, 80 of which were usable. Half of these were newer, digital hearing aids.

At the beginning of March we sent the hearing aids along with a computer installed with adjustment software, a Hi-pro box, the necessary accessories and precise instructions for commissioning and adjustment by carrier to Dhulikhel.

The establishment of a hearing aid department is proceeding rapidly in the Dhulikhel hospital.

In summary, the following can be said:

- There are many people with intermediate to severe hearing impairment in Nepal that can be easily supplied with modern digital hearing aids. Amongst these are many children, for whom a basic education and "normal life" would be enabled by the hearing aids.
- For a reasonable expense, people in Nepal can be trained to administer the hearing aids and carefully adjust them, to a limited extent. For this, however, regular support and supply of information and materials is necessary.
- The collection campaign for used hearing aids was very successful. For a well-trained German acoustician, dealing with the multitude of different types of hearing aids represents no problem whatsoever. For the instructed employees in Nepal, however, this presents serious problems. With a modern hearing aid, such as the Aero 311 forte, with which approximately 80% of patients can be well-provided, the adjustment is significantly easier.
- For the establishment of a long-term, functioning hearing aid supply in Dhulikhel, a great deal of work is still needed.

Perhaps one might question why we have begun this campaign. For a Nepali the answer is very easy. They would say it improves their Karma, which is the sum of the good and bad deeds that determine their next life.

For us a similar thought process might hold true: because things are going so well in our (current) lives, we should help other people for whom it is not going so well.

Moreover, on a personal level you gain much more than you invest, as things that are basically taken for granted here can obtain a much greater significance.

We would like to extend our very special thanks to our sponsors, the companies Phonak, Audio Service and Detax, as well as the ISMA group. We would also like to thank our old and new friends in Nepal, who have contributed a great deal to the success of this campaign.

Brigitte Weitkamp-Moog im April 2008

Account for donations:

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