

Healing Care in Ghana

by Chuck Bigger, Photojournalist

Less than 24 hours after surgery to receive a SIGN Nail in his left tibia, Shaibu tested his newfound mobility and found it energizing. With the aid of crutches, he moved about the orthopaedic ward at Wenchi Methodist Hospital, in Wenchi, Ghana, with such efficiency that a mere 12 hours later he was discharged and sent home to continue his recovery. Shaibu, 29, had not been able to walk on his own for the last four months.

While working as a driver's mate transporting goods to Ghana's port in Accra, Shaibu's leg was shattered when his vehicle was involved in a collision. Due to country-wide limited access to orthopaedic surgeons and fear of a large hospital bill, Shaibu first sought the help of a traditional healer. Years ago, before mechanized high speed road travel including motorcycles was routine, traditional healers could often treat the simple fractures common at the time.

At today's speeds and with a high prevalence of unskilled drivers, traffic fatalities are at an all-time high. Injuries are often severe and beyond traditional healers' ability to manage.

Shaibu is one of almost 1,100 SIGN Implant recipients since the 2016 start of the SIGN Program at Wenchi Methodist Hospital. Dr. Sibiri Ballu is the sole orthopaedic surgeon at the 250-bed non-profit hospital in Wenchi. He brought the SIGN Program to the small hardscrabble town on the western side of Ghana's verdant farming belt, near the border with Ivory Coast.

Dr. Ballu performs all the SIGN Surgeries at the hospital with 50 beds devoted to orthopaedic patients—which are always full. He is hoping to add a second surgeon to join him in March, and there is talk of an expansion of the orthopaedic wing of the hospital to cope with the burgeoning need for orthopaedic trauma care.

In a country the size of Oregon with a population of 33 million, Dr. Ballu is one of only 50 orthopaedic surgeons in the entire country. Traffic accidents in Ghana are a pandemic of their own, averaging 8 deaths and 48 injuries each day.

"Fifty beds are not even enough to handle the burden of trauma," says Dr. Ballu. "We have to work extra to discharge patients as soon as possible so that others may be treated."

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Shaibu (above) was back on his feet 12 hours after SIGN Surgery by Dr. Sibiri Ballu (right).

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(continued from front page)

Patients like Shaibu, who sought the help of traditional healers first, make up about one-fifth of Dr. Ballu's SIGN Surgery case load. But this is much improved over when the SIGN Program was first introduced, when revision surgeries—those to correct improperly healed fractures—approached nearly half of the cases.

“Revision surgeries take longer, drain the energy of surgeons, and drain scarce resources,” explains Dr. Ballu. They also cost the patients valuable recovery time; in Shaibu's case, four months were lost.

“Had he come to us in the beginning,” said Dr. Ballu, “four months down the line he would be already walking without the need of any aid.”

Dr. Ballu's work at the remote hospital has garnered a national and regional reputation across West Africa, with patients coming from across Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Benin, and even as far as Liberia.

In addition to his work as a surgeon, Dr. Ballu also serves as a mentor and trainer in the SIGN System, training

doctors from those same countries to bring the SIGN System to their own hospitals.

“They come and receive training under me and return to their countries where they have similar challenges, if not even worse than what we have here, and are able to bring relief to their patients there,” he said. “The SIGN Program is very good, especially in

remote areas of the country where most people are living on less than one dollar a day.”

“I want to thank SIGN for continuously making available these nails, and I want to thank all the donors who are supporting them to continue in this good work. They are making a difference in the lives of a lot of people.”



Above: Dr. Ballu reviews Shaibu's x-ray. Below: SIGN Surgery enables patients to quickly recover and return home from the busy hospital ward.



Back to Work After Fracture

by Chuck Bigger, Photojournalist

Nicholas is a busy man. He is a husband and father of four, and he operates three businesses to support his family. Nicholas' world came to a screeching halt when a truck he was traveling in blew a tire and rolled over, throwing Nicholas and other passengers from the vehicle. Nicholas was transported to an area hospital with injuries to both shoulders, a pelvic fracture, and a badly broken left femur.

After spending two weeks in the hospital with no real steps toward a recovery process, Nicholas was transferred two hours away to Wenchi Methodist Hospital, under the care of orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Sibiri Ballu. In one surgical session Dr. Ballu repaired both of his shoulder injuries, his pelvic injury, and installed a SIGN Nail in Nicholas' broken femur.

Four days later he was discharged from the hospital, and two weeks after that Nicholas was back at work operating a small convenience store with his wife near his home, operating a small poultry farm, and working as a carpenter building coffins at his own shop in town which he walks the three miles to daily.

"I am as strong as I was before the accident," says Nicholas. "I have seen my friends who didn't go to the hospital after the accident, they can't even work and even walking is hard for them, but for me I am working as before the accident."

SIGN Surgery enabled Nicholas to quickly return to work after a fractured femur.



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