

## **'Acting Against Worms'**

### **Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (SCI)/Vector Control Division, Uganda Ministry of Health (VCD)/TheatreScience Public Health (Bilharzia) School Drama Project in Busia, Uganda – 2009-10**

#### **Short Report**

#### **Introduction**

This report is written from the perspective of TheatreScience and shares details of the 'Acting Against Worms' (AAW) project, which took place in Uganda, from October 2009 until April 2010. Rebecca Gould and Jeff Teare were the theatre practitioners on this health initiative, which aimed to create drama pieces in order to share important health messages about the prevention and treatment of the debilitating disease Bilharzia. The project was instigated by Fiona Fleming of the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (SCI) based at Imperial College, London; Narcis Kabatereine of the Vector Control Division (VCD), Department of Health, Ugandan Government and Becky McCall, freelance science journalist. Fiona and Becky made the initial application to the Wellcome Trust and Fiona set up and project managed the first stage of the project: a seven-day visit to schools in the Busia district of Uganda. However, as Fiona and Becky were both pregnant, neither was able to attend the final stage of the project; a second seven-day visit to Busia in April 2010. Narcis was supportive throughout and drove down expressly to attend the final Festival. Rebecca and Jeff delivered all stages of the project throughout.

AAW was funded by the Wellcome Trust through its International Public Engagement Award. The project's initial objectives were:

- To create a drama-based initiative aimed at improving understanding of and public engagement with health messages related to preventing and controlling intestinal worms amongst rural communities in Uganda
- To actively involve school children through the medium of drama

TheatreScience advised Fiona and Becky on the writing of the application in 2008 and was pleased to be asked to deliver the drama content in July 2009.

Participating primary schools were chosen in the Lumino region of Busia, Uganda. They were agreed on by Fiona, Moses Adriko (VCD) and local vector control officer Robert Malimba. A local Community-Based Organisation (CBO) was recruited by Robert to work with TheatreScience on the drama elements of the project

## First Visit

This took place in October 2009. Fiona was already in Uganda; Becky, Rebecca and Jeff joined her in Busia.



On the first day an In-Service Training Workshop was held, exploring methods of devising drama and performance, the biology of Bilharzia and incorporating the messages about the prevention and treatment of the disease. Teachers from all the participating schools attended plus the CBO members (Anjera Nabwire, Gertrude Mirembe, Okuku Wycliffe and Titus Wabwire).

Over the next five days, workshops for twenty Year Six students were held in each of the nine participating schools: Nanyuma, Lumuli, Busime, Bubo, Bwanikha, Sirere, Lunyo, Busiabala and Bulekei. The workshops were led by Rebecca and Jeff with input on health advice from Robert and Fiona. The workshops concentrated on storytelling exercises, and activities based on making physical images to communicate narrative. They also incorporated the sharing of local songs and dances. The biology of Bilharzia and the latest health advice was communicated by Robert, and all participants were encouraged to ask questions and to discuss why carrying out the health advice was often difficult or even impossible.

During each workshop two students were selected to lead their group. They were given an Airmail envelope and their main job was to collate all of the students' ideas and develop them into one story; this would then be sent to Theatre science in the UK over the Christmas break.

Very early in the workshop process it became apparent to us that the general awareness of the students about the prevention and treatment of Bilharzia was good. However, it also became clear that there were a number of social, economic and behavioural issues with applying this awareness. The problems they stated included:

- too far to travel to a safe water borehole
- queuing for and pumping the water at boreholes took too long

- parents and other adults preferred lake water as they said the borehole water was salty
- necessary to fish in Lake Victoria not only for their own food but for fish to sell, to make money for themselves and their families
- they received treatment for Bilharzia from SCI/VCD every year anyway why should they bother avoiding infection?

## Story to Scenario

All the participating schools sent stories to Theatrescience in the UK, some with artwork attached, which was uploaded to the Theatrescience website (see [www.theatrescience.org.uk](http://www.theatrescience.org.uk), where video of the project is also available).

Jeff adapted these stories into scenario form. Fiona, Rebecca and Becky then contributed to the process with Fiona making some necessary biological science changes.

The scenarios were then emailed to Robert in Busia who distributed them through the CBOs back to the schools.

The CBOs then revisited the schools and began the process of turning the scenarios into a fully realised performance.

## Second Visit

Rebecca and Jeff returned to Uganda in April 2010. They were met by Edridah Muheki from VCD in Kampala before driving to Busia, where they were introduced to the District Health Director and Deputy Admin Officer.

Two schools were visited on the first afternoon by the whole team but in order to speed the process up, and to allow more time for detailed reworking of the performance pieces, it was decided to split the team on the second day.



The team visited seven schools on the second day. Only one of the nine schools (Bulekei, also chosen as the Festival site) had not developed a performance piece. The whole team were delighted by the obvious commitment shown by the eight

schools. They had all produced pieces of theatre which, whilst varying massively in style, length and subject matter, shared a common energy and enthusiasm for performing and for telling stories. The performances had been rehearsed outside, generally underneath the largest tree in the playground. Often pupils and teachers had to overcome a list of obstacles: non-expert teachers; regular pupil and teacher absence; illness; blazing sunshine and rehearsals being watched by hundreds of other children. Despite this all eight schools that had completed the task were proud of their achievements and excited about sharing their hard work with us.

Five schools were chosen to present their work at the culminating Festival. On the third and fourth day the whole team visited all five schools at least once to work on the pieces. All of the rehearsals/run-throughs in schools were witnessed by other pupils, in one case by the entire rest of the school. Peer learning appeared to take place during these rehearsals.

Some biological information had to be corrected. One school seemed to think that being infected by a Bilharzia worm was akin to being stung by a wasp. Another over-estimated the prophylactic effects of boiling lake water, which is more useful for non-Bilharzia infections.

The main aspects of re-rehearsal were 'show doctoring', speeding up the action, improving the use of stage space and getting the students to be louder ('Amakulu!') and faster ('Mangu!').

## **Festival**

The Festival took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> April on the playing field of Bwanikha School. An audience of over three hundred finally assembled (having been scheduled to start at 9.30am, the Festival commenced at 10.50am). The audience consisted of non-performing school groups, parents, students from the adjoining technical college, members of the general public and various local politicians and dignitaries, who gave speeches of varying lengths between the performances.



All five schools acquitted themselves well, especially in terms of open-air audibility and improvised props and costumes. However some of the pieces were considerably longer than they had been in rehearsal. Two local adjudicators had been recruited, who carried out their task extremely thoroughly and were able to give very detailed scores and feedback on all of the pieces at the end. They gave

the schools percentage marks in various categories, including effectiveness of message, stagecraft, acting and audibility. Sirere School was declared the overall winner - perhaps because of the high quality of their singing, dancing and drumming - and were presented with a goat as first prize by the Guest of Honour, a local politician. The SCI presented footballs to all participating schools and Theatrescience provided sweets.

## **Observations and Comments**

The general level of awareness about the prevention and treatment of Bilharzia among participating students seemed fairly high but various misconceptions had to be corrected by the project team through the process.

The level of commitment to the project was high in the eight schools that created pieces of drama. The organisation of the project by the Uganda team (Edredah, Moses, Robert et al.) was generally excellent, again under sometimes difficult circumstances

Peer learning almost certainly took place in schools and the Festival seemed to raise the profile of Bilharzia prevention and treatment locally but we will have to wait for the full evaluation to know more.

Our learning curve was huge: theoretically, practically and, especially, culturally. The practicalities of running workshops and rehearsals with no electricity, little equipment and often in the open air needed some degree of improvisation and the cultural differences sometimes caused minor embarrassment (e.g. Jeff's pronunciation of 'Amakulu' which sometimes came out to mean 'legs').

Narcis Kabatareine said after the Festival that he hoped 'this was just the beginning'. If more work is to be undertaken we recommend addressing the following issues:

While the teachers and the Busia Drama Team (CBOs) were extremely committed and enthusiastic, they requested further training to be able to carry out the task more fully.

More expert intervention into the schools between the two Theatrescience visits would have helped; monitoring of progress in schools did not really happen.

The CBOs visited the schools between February and April perhaps two or three times but unfortunately no information was shared with the SCI or Theatrescience. Better communication would have, for example, flagged-up that Bulekei was struggling.

The perhaps over-strict adjudication of the Festival, awarding a last as well as a first position, is not something that Theatrescience would support. Also the exclusion of three schools from, at least performing at, if not attending, the Festival was not handled well. Some of the schools turned up clutching their props and costumes, expecting to perform only to be told they weren't.

However, overall we consider the 'Acting Against Worms' project to be successful and very worthwhile. And, congratulations to Fiona, Becky and Gertrude for giving birth half way through!

## **Theatrescience**

April 2010.