

Film

Surgery for all: the right to heal

“Surgery and Health for all”—the prophetic address by former WHO Director-General Halfdan T Mahler has echoed without response since 1980. “What I am suggesting”, Mahler proposed, “is an internationally agreed list of essential surgical procedures in support of primary health care that would help countries to decide on their own list and related training and equipment”. Struggling with the implicit rationale of unessential surgery, he concluded: “The alternative for most people in the world is either the kind of selected essential surgery I am advocating or absolutely nothing at all.”

The Right to Heal is a troubling film that exposes the enduring absence of surgery from current global health priorities. With moving pictures of patients and providers, director Jaymie Ang Henry contextualises the realities of some of the estimated 2 billion people who lack access to surgical services when needed, and propounds a strategy for closing the global surgery divide. Health system inertia is incompatible with today’s epidemiological shift: we can no longer afford not to treat conditions such as traumatic, obstetric, or abdominal emergencies, cancer, and congenital malformations.

One of the difficulties in achieving universal surgical coverage today is that different strategies tend to polarise around artificial dichotomies: access versus quality; quick fixes versus long-term solutions; humanitarian assistance versus health-system strengthening. To address today’s anachronistic gaps of surgical coverage and the silent epidemic of perioperative mortality we must realise that surgical coverage requires both surgical skills and operative management, and there is no vertical silver bullet for the complex challenges of surgery for all. Surgery demands a health system just like the health system should demand surgery.

As the world looks towards the post-2015 agenda, global surgery faces a turning point. At the inauguration of the *Lancet* Commission on Global Surgery, Jim Yong Kim, President of The World Bank, underlined current challenges in the delivery of surgical care: “the poor suffer due to a shortage of skilled personnel, inadequate infrastructure, and a pay-as-you-go approach to financing surgical care”. Next year the World Health Assembly will hopefully be in a position to pass a resolution on surgery.

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With these perspectives in mind, *The Right to Heal* is timely and engages the public and policy makers in the issues at hand. Revealing the poverty traps and devastating effects of insufficient surgery, we meet 7-year-old Rodney with untreated club feet, 8-year-old Job with non-union of his broken right arm, and 17-year-old Pricilla who has vaginal fistula after unattended obstructed labour. The film features the Rwandan Minister of Health who emphasises the need for residency programmes for obstetricians, surgeons, and anaesthetists. Her stance contrasts

with the more immediate pragmatism of training Malawian medical officers to perform select surgical procedures, and with the work of charitable NGOs helping those the national health-care system has abandoned.

There is an important balance to be struck in humanitarian documentary reporting, between stereotyped sensationalism and recognition of human equality behind a veil of ignorance. The cinematic language that solicits compassion from high-income country donors speaks with a different cultural accent from that which will spur empathy and recognition from those in the field. I find myself most affected by low-key narratives, by the simple cases of neglected surgical disease. *The Right to Heal* has already engaged with funders and policy-makers, and it has the potential to mobilise public support at the grassroots-level through social media. I hope these compelling stories of patients and providers will serve as cure for cognitive cataract to surgical inequities.

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I am Co-chair of the *Lancet* Commission on Global Surgery.



The Right to Heal
Written and directed by Jaymie Ang Henry. Golden Hour Films
<http://www.therighttoheal.org/>
To watch *The Right to Heal* see Online for video

15% OF BIRTHS HAVE POTENTIALLY FATAL COMPLICATIONS

- IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES 42% OF WOMEN HAVE NO SKILLED BIRTH ATTENDANT
- EVERY 2 MINUTES, A WOMAN DIES DUE TO COMPLICATIONS FROM CHILDBIRTH
- ACCESS TO BASIC OBSTETRIC SURGERY COULD SAVE 86,220 LIVES EVERY YEAR.

ESSENTIAL SURGERY = MATERNAL HEALTH

GLOBALLY 2 BILLION PEOPLE LACK ACCESS TO THE MOST BASIC SURGICAL CARE

WHAT HAPPENS WITHOUT IT?
Minor injuries become life-threatening complications.
Common birth-defects become life-long disabilities.
Otherwise-easily treated conditions cause death.

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL SURGERIES?

AFFORDABLE: Inexpensive, safe, consistently provided, essential to patient outcomes.

EFFECTIVE: Simple procedures that quickly change lives.

ACCESSIBLE: Can be performed at district hospitals, health centres, and health posts.

- obstructed labor
- clubfoot
- cleft lip
- general injury
- cataracts
- appendicitis
- hernia

ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SURGERY SAVES WOMEN'S LIVES.

essential surgery.com
therighttoheal.org

Golden Hour Films (2013) photograph/retrieved from www.therighttoheal.org