

HIMALAYAN HOSPITALS

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I came to believe I belonged there

Unexpected insights into Ed Hillary and his doctors

by PHILIP TEMPLE

The prosaic title of this book and the chronological sequence of chapters, detailing volunteer doctors' service at Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust hospitals, suggest a worthy, and potentially tedious, labour of love. But they disguise a work of unexpected heft and insight.

Author Dr Michael Gill was there at the beginning of the aid enterprise 50 years ago when Hillary asked Sherpa Urkien what he might do to help his people. The illiterate sirdar's reply was, 'We would like a school for our children'. Hillary took him at his word and Khumjung school was opened in June 1961. On his departure, he wrote, 'I little realised I was leaving behind what was to become a new way of life for me'. A 'new way' that was to substantially occupy the rest of Ed Hillary's life.

More schools followed. But as early as 1963 there was evidence that medical aid would transform Sherpa lives even more than education. The doctor attached to Ed Hillary's school-building cum climbing expedition that year, Phil Houghton, was able to vaccinate 3000 people and limit the disaster of a smallpox epidemic to a 'few dozen people and about twenty deaths'. This medical intervention had not been part of Hillary's plans but it dramatised the need for a hospital in the Khumbu region. Houghton, with Mike Gill, stayed on to run a clinic and carry out a medical survey which laid the groundwork for the opening of Khunde hospital in 1966. For the next 35 years, Gill remained a member of Hillary's Himalayan Trust medical committee.

The committee's leading charge was to find and support the volunteer doctors, mostly from New Zealand. Twenty-two of the 470-page book's 25 chapters recount their work and experiences between 1966 and 2002. These are concluded by the supreme achievement of Hillary's education and medical aid programme - fully qualified Sherpa doctors running the hospitals.

Lynley Cook, one of the Khunde doctors, interviewed her co-volunteers and collected the letters, photos and other records for Mike Gill to compile the stories. The pattern becomes familiar: travel at short notice, all found but no pay, a short language course in Kathmandu, fly in to Lukla, culture shock, altitude problems, a quick handover from the previous incumbents, endless Sherpas parties with bad chang hangovers. And then the daily and nightly challenges of dealing with every medical problem imaginable in the most remote location on earth. The achievements were monumental, such as near eradication of TB through administering antibiotics, and the elimination of goitre and cretinism through district-wide iodine injections. Dealing with all manner of childbirth difficulties and tragedies run like an umbilical cord through the book, as well as the subtle struggle with Sherpa llawa, or shamans, to achieve or take credit for the recovery of patients.

Unexpected is a more intimate revelation of Ed Hillary's character and behaviour than one may find in his own autobiographies or Alexa Johnston's 2005 hagiography. Hillary is said to have run the hospitals with a mixture of 'laissez faire and authoritarianism'. He did not take kindly to criticism, real or implied, which led at intervals to contretemps with his volunteers in the field. The enduring depressive effect of his first wife Louise's death in the air crash of 1975 had its part to play and this is sensitively explored.

Hillary's fund-raising efforts and hands-on management of the aid programmes were as heroic as climbing Everest. When I took a trekking group to the Everest region in 1978, my Sherpa sirdar described him as, 'Our father and our mother.' and Mike Gill writes, 'He was a great man. There have not been many like him'. But I put the book down filled with enormous admiration for the heroic efforts of young doctors, sometimes with young children, who gave up two years of their lives to saving the health and lives of others under often dire circumstances. They gave a great deal and, deservedly, received a great deal in return from the Sherpas. 'Emotionally I came to believe I belonged there.'

HIMALAYAN HOSPITALS, Sir Edmund Hillary's Everest Legacy,
by Michael Gill with Lynley Cook (Craig Potton, \$49.99).