

Galmi Hospital prepares in the face of COVID-19

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Galmi Hospital, a medical ministry of SIM International, has been bracing for the impact of COVID-19 and sadly, their plans must now become reality.

Galmi's chief medical officer Dr Anne-Sophie Rowcroft says it's been a mercy that Niger has remained free from documented COVID-19 cases for so long. But now, with the first case in Niamey confirmed on March 19, the hospital staff will make those planned changes to their work and ministry.

Anne-Sophie defined the key questions. We're asking, "How do we care for each other? How do we care for our staff? How do we care for our patients?"

The 180-bed hospital, which has 235 local staff, eight surgical residents, 15 SIM mission workers including 11 missionary doctors, is actively readying their facilities and staff through defensive measures. As a result of Niger president Mahamadou Issoufou's precautionary directives, the hospital has moved into the 'red zone' of operations.

Until recently, the hospital was able to produce 100 litres of oxygen a minute with their oxygen plant – a vital commodity given that COVID-19 attacks the respiratory system. But the plant broke down a few weeks ago, leaving only six oxygen concentrators at their disposal. Each of these produces just 10 litres a minute.

Repairs to the oxygen plant cost 4,000 USD, which is a significant financial burden given the extra expenses the hospital is facing as they purchase other medical necessities like thermometers, gloves, bleach and examination gowns.

They're attempting to collect additional oxygen concentrators, and these are still relatively expensive at about 1,600 USD each, but Galmi is not the only hospital in Niger looking these sought-after resources.

These financial concerns are stark, but Anne-Sophie remains hopeful because she trusts in God as her source of comfort and the world's source of provision.

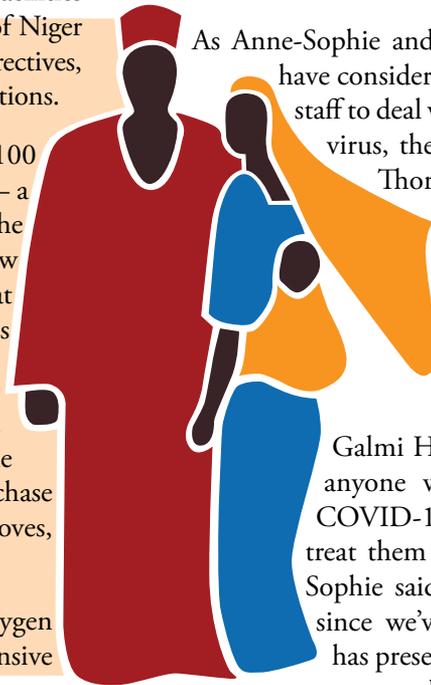
The reality in our work is that we have to be very dependent on God in prayer, because our work is so often surpassing what we can do. We have a huge volume of patients every day and limited resources – it's a regular part of life here in Galmi. Certainly, the shutdown of airports takes away that feeling of control, that feeling of I have options, the feeling of "I can leave the country when I want." Some of us have been reflecting on 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, which talks about how in our weakness, God's power is able to really show through. And we can boast in our weakness and boast in the greatness of God and what He will do in this situation.

As Anne-Sophie and the team at Galmi Hospital have considered how to prepare the medical staff to deal with the potential spread of the virus, they have focused on education.

Thorough handwashing has taken priority, and a worker has been stationed at the front of the hospital to ensure each person who comes into the building follows the hygienic guidelines.

Galmi Hospital has chosen to separate anyone with the basic symptoms of COVID-19—a fever and a cough—and treat them outdoors. Fortunately, Anne-Sophie said, "In the last couple of days since we've implemented that, no one has presented those symptoms, so that's been quite nice."

Each day, Galmi's outpatient clinic sees around 200 to 300 people, so their waiting room



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exceeds the government's recommended 50-person limit. The staff is attempting to decrease the large gatherings while still providing Christ-like care and necessary medical treatment.

However, before the Galmi Hospital team restricts the number of people gathering by reducing routine services, they want to supply their patients with sufficient medication and treatment. They intend to see patients with chronic conditions, like diabetes and heart diseases, over the next two weeks, providing them with enough medication to last three months rather than the standard one.

The hospital is working with the government to announce this policy to the community over radio. After the two weeks, Galmi Hospital will close their general outpatient area, while continuing specialized treatment, like their HIV services, prenatal centre and dental clinic.

In conjunction with the government, the hospital is looking for appropriate treatment centres for COVID-19 that can institute quarantine without endangering other patients.

Anne-Sophie explained, "We've done this before. For example, we had a cholera outbreak in 2018. So, we worked with the government and MSF to find a possible location. We want to set something up for this situation."

While the global pandemic causes many to worry, Anne-Sophie and the other SIM missionaries at Galmi regularly see serious illnesses and are equipped with a transcendent hope.

She said, "We are surrounded by death every day, which is hard on our team and it's hard to not have the short-term support we would normally have coming in to have a bit of time out. But there's always opportunity—we have so many opportunities here and that's why we do it, that's why we're here: There are so many opportunities to share the gospel."

Anne-Sophie shared God's grace a specific case of a young woman undergoing a Caesarean section in her first pregnancy. While a surgeon operated on the young woman, the baby came out in need of resuscitation. Only one oxygen concentrator was available, and its cord was twisted. As the anaesthetist attempted to unwind the cord and help the baby, he broke away from the woman, who had a rare reaction to her spinal anaesthetic, was unable to breathe and went into cardiac arrest. The team started CPR and managed to get her back, but she experienced a severe brain injury without oxygen. This showed the impact of a lack of resources for otherwise well people.

Anne-Sophie reflected on the outcome of that situation:

In that, we feel completely powerless. When you look at the outcomes of these situations, they're really poor, yet now, two days later, she's awake, talking and breastfeeding her baby. I see that as a miracle. That really is truly a miracle. In that, I think we see the power of God. In our weakness, in our inability, he comes through and shows us his power. I think it's very much a reminder to us that even when we feel more under control, we only think we are. In fact, we need to keep coming and resting in Christ. 