The Lifebox Foundation – Make it Zero

100% of operations in the developed world utilise pulse oximeters. Recognised as the international standard in 2009, they’ve played an integral role in patient safety since the 80s. But today, over 70,000 operating rooms worldwide still don’t have a pulse oximeter. And more than 6 million lives are put at risk every year in Latin America and Africa alone. That’s over 5 hundred lives every hour. Three out of 4 patients in Africa don’t have access to one, one out of 3 in Eastern Europe face the same danger, it’s time 2 do away with these numbers. A donation of just 1 pulse oximeter will help us … make it zero.

Zero operations without patient monitoring with a pulse oximeter. Zero operations performed without the World Health Organization (WHO) Surgical Safety Checklist. This is the Lifebox call to action and it formally launched in March at the World Congress of Anaesthesiologists in Buenos Aires. Thanks to the support of the Australian Society of Anaesthetists we’re already on our way.

In the November 2011 issue of the ASA news, the ASA announced its support for Lifebox in a powerful editorial by President Dr Andrew Mulcahy that highlighted the global pulse oximetry gap and asked members to consider purchasing an oximeter for a facility in need “to further assist in improving access to safe anaesthesia care and reducing the oximeter deficit in our region.”

Since then we have been overwhelmed by your support and the donations collected through the ASA website. You have contributed more than $9000 and been instrumental in raising awareness of the pulse oximetry gap across the Southern Hemisphere.

We’re honoured this special ‘world anaesthesia’ edition of the ASA news highlights the Lifebox mission and offers readers the opportunity to continue to support this important work.

Lifebox is a UK-registered charity founded in 2011 and is a collaboration between the Harvard School of Public Health, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, the World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists (of which the ASA is
a member) and the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland.

Lifebox aims to improve the safety of surgery in low-income countries by enabling access to high-quality, low-cost pulse oximeters and encouraging universal adoption of the WHO Surgical Safety Checklist.

Tonga was one of the first countries to benefit from the ASA’s support of Lifebox. Thanks to your donations we were able to send five oximeters to the Tongan Ministry of Health in spring last year. This South Pacific archipelago has a population of just over 100,000 spread across many islands and the country’s under-resourced hospitals struggle to provide healthcare to such a disparate group. The main island, Tongatapu, hosts the biggest hospital – 160 beds with three fully functioning operating theatres, but even this facility lacks sufficient oximeters to monitor the bare minimum of patients. “When there is a patient in the intensive care unit, one of these monitors is used [there], and an operating theatre has to close down,” explained Dr Adriano Cocciante, an Australian anaesthetist working in Tonga last year.

The Lifebox oximeters were provided to the three biggest hospitals – in Tongatapu, Vava’u and Ha’apai. The Prince Ngu Hospital in Vava’u, the second largest hospital in Tonga, has 80 beds and just one pulse oximeter. Adriano told us that even where oximeters are still functioning, new ones “are desperately needed as many of the existing oximeters are showing signs of wear and tear”.

We all know of initiatives that, with the best intentions, parachute in unsuitable equipment to colleagues in low-resource countries. Over-complex devices don’t respond to basic needs, essential components can’t be replaced, plugs don’t fit and colleagues aren’t trained to use them. Equipment languishes in warehouses while desperate need goes unmet.

The Lifebox oximeter and model of distribution is different. The model was designed to specifications developed by WHO. It is the ideal oximeter for low-resource settings; robust, intuitive and easy to maintain, it is operational from mains electricity and with both rechargeable and disposable batteries – crucial for operating rooms worldwide that cannot depend on a source of electricity lasting for the duration of an operation. The Lifebox oximeter comes with a six-language education CD-Rom, containing a complete suite of self-learning and classroom teaching materials about pulse oximetry and the WHO Surgical Safety Checklist to ensure that they make a sustainable impact. Each package costs just US$250, including delivery.

In the last year, Lifebox has distributed more than 1500 pulse oximeters to operating rooms in 47 countries. (You can read more about where and how we work in our 2011 annual review at www.lifebox.org/2011-annual-review/). We’ve been joined by the American Society of Anesthesiologists, the Canadian Anesthesiologists’ Society and the New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists and will be working with many other professional societies in the coming months to bring the ‘Make it Zero’ campaign to a global audience.

This is a formidable start and we could not have got this far without the support of the ASA. But we still have a long
way to go. There are now more operations performed each year than there are babies being born and, as stalwarts of the operating theatre, we all know that the safety of these procedures depends on the safety of anaesthesia. Lifebox aims to put 5000 pulse oximeters in operating rooms in need in the next two years.

That’s why we’re thrilled the ASA backed Lifebox at the World Congress of Anaesthesiologists. We were at the conference in Buenos Aires – we featured at the Harold Griffiths Symposium on Wednesday, 28 March and we want to thank the members who visited our stand to meet the team and learn more about how donations are already making a difference.

The drive to ensure all operating theatres worldwide have access to a pulse oximeter is one of the most exciting initiatives in modern anaesthesia. We’re proud to stand with the ASA on this mission and look forward to working with you in the coming years to make it a reality. Thank you for your support.

Sarah Kessler
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