

Volunteer Award 2009

Sr Franca de Simone, Cameroon

We would like to introduce you to Sr Franca de Simone. Sr Franca is an Italian nursing religious sister, who began working in Cameroon 1980, in Nyamanga, an isolated area about 150 kilometres north of the capital Yaoundé. This region has savanna vegetation, is close to humid equatorial forest; with temperatures between 22 and 25°C and high annual rainfall. It is host to many parasitic diseases. The inhabitants are mostly farmers with small mixed holdings.

Research in 1997 showed that the prevalence of epilepsy, at 5.8% of the population, was twice the average occurrence. As a result, the Remptor Hominis group, with which Sr Franca worked, was asked to take initiatives to try to combat the disease. Two years later, in 1999, regular monthly clinics had been established and each person with epilepsy was being treated. By 2003, just six years later, two-thirds of those with epilepsy had no further seizures. Providing epilepsy care and treatment for 500 people with very limited resources and in an isolated and remote region, this is a fantastic achievement.

Although the incidence of epilepsy was beginning to be controlled, stigma and misunderstanding, loss of dignity and absence of employment, continued to be a problem. It was at this point, in 2003, that Sr Franca first made contact with IBE to tell us that she was working to create a lay epilepsy association and to enquire about IBE membership. Since then, Sr Franca has been a regular correspondent and has kept us up to date with her dedicated work for the people of the region. The Cameroon Association Against Epilepsy became a Full Member in 2005.

Sr Franca's activities are many-fold. By 2009 she was involved in the medical care of more than 700 people with epilepsy who attend the Health Centre or who are cared for by mobile clinics. With help from Prof Raffaele Canger and a group of epileptologists who have visited the area and who continue to support the centre from Italy, Sr Franca learned

how to register EEGs. The EEG machine was donated by the Italian doctors and the EEGs are sent to Italy for interpretation.

She has also created employment for a large number of people through vegetable growing enterprises. In 2007 the association was selected to receive Promising Strategy funding for a tomato-growing project. Sr Franca managed to stretch these funds so that they also provided seed money (literally) for the cultivation of other crops and to start a pig rearing enterprise.

In an email sent in 2006, with news and photos, Sr Franca wrote: "I am sending you this photo of Christine, a young girl who has begun to smile again. She has also returned to school and on Saturdays she comes to work in the community plot".

In another message she proudly sent us this picture of the 7 month old daughter of Laurentine, a young mother with epilepsy (but whose seizures had been controlled). "The baby is called Franca de Simone. Yes!! She is named after me as a Thank You".

And if that is not enough, Sr France was worked to convince the government and Minister of Health of the urgent need to address the problem of epilepsy by the adoption and validation of national standards for epilepsy.

In 2007 she was presented with the Cameroon Order of Chevalier for her work with and dedication to the people of Cameroon.

ILAE President Prof Peter Wolf, who met Sr Franca in Cameroon, wrote as follows:

"Sr Franca de Simone is an Italian nurse who in admirable effort established an ambulatory epilepsy service in the countryside of Cameroon, far from the Capital where no specialist care was available. With the help of Italian epileptologists, she got an EEG machine and learned to register EEGs. In spite of negative attitudes of some doctors in the city, her clinic came to provide for several hundreds of patients in the area."

We had hoped to have Sr Franca with us here today so that she could tell us about her work in person. However, Sr Franca's term in Cameroon ended a few months ago. After 29 years in Africa and following a few weeks rest in her native Italy, she is now learning Spanish in Madrid before she takes up a new post in Paraguay. What is Africa's loss is surely Latin America's gain!

We are hoping that Sr Franca will continue to correspond with us in her new position and perhaps she might even help in identifying a new member for us in Paraguay.

I hope that you will agree that Sr Franca de Simone is a worthy winner of this year's Volunteer Award.