

Health Feature
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NURSING STUDENTS LEARN WHILE DOING- RESPONDING TO THE NUTRITIONAL CRISIS

It is mid morning as about fifty mothers and their malnourished children sit out on the grass in the open space at Tulla therapeutic feeding centre in Ethiopia's Southern Nations and Nationalities People's Region. Twenty three-year-old nursing student, Yeshihareg Yoseph, dressed in her freshly ironed white nurse's coat and with a determined but friendly look on her face, has just arrived for her first day of work. She crouches down and gingerly touches the weak hand of a two-year-old boy whose dulled eyes barely respond, while she introduces herself to his mother.

"When the school master told us about the situation and requested our help, we automatically responded", she explains. "This is the first time I have seen so many children in this terrible situation but yet I feel lucky. I feel fortunate to be able to help these children who are in such desperate need."

Yeshihareg is one of two hundred nursing students deployed from nursing schools in Awassa and Yirgalem to the growing number of therapeutic feeding centres now operating in the region to cope with the growing number of severely malnourished children. They will spend the next three months, their school break, working as nutritional assistants.



She studies and lives at Yirgalem, one of the largest nursing schools in the region. Started by Missionaries in 1967, it is now a Government run school with an annual enrolment of 96 students, a rapid increase from the 38 students less than a decade ago. All of them once qualified will work in the regional health system, at the moment severely understaffed and stretched to cope with the mounting health and nutritional impact of the country's drought.

Yeshihareg, who shares a sunny bedroom with three other students, has always wanted to be a nurse. With a sister also working in the profession, and both parents working as teachers, she is proud to be involved in this community work and believes it is important that more Ethiopians are given the opportunity to learn skills to help their communities.

The student's responsibilities include preparing the enriched food, supervising the feeding, carrying out medical surveillance including the diagnosis and treatment of common childhood illnesses, especially malaria, promoting personal and environmental hygiene, and conducting nutritional promotion to parents of sick children.

This is the first time students have been deployed to assist in the area of nutrition. Often their practical experience is limited to working in the health clinics, and at the hospitals.

But with a two-day intensive training conducted by UNICEF's nutritionist Mohammed Foh, on the management of acute malnutrition, she is confident that they are up for the job.

"The training was a bit different from what we have learnt in school. This was the first time we learnt in such detail about acute malnutrition," she says but adds that as her teacher will be with them at the centres to provide practical support.

Sr. Tezeta Ayallew, a short woman with a motherly smile, has been teaching nursing for more than 10 years. She has never seen the nutritional situation deteriorate so quickly and believes the deployment of her students is an important contribution to saving lives. "The students gain knowledge about community problems, but can also share what they know about good nutrition and family planning", she says.



It is a perspective echoed by the Regional Health Bureau Head, Dr. Shifferaw Teklemariam who believes that giving these students this experience will ensure they will be better qualified in the future to identify and understand nutrition related illness often overlooked. "The deployment of these students has two principal advantages. Firstly it will build their own skill on managing micronutrient and acute malnutrition cases. Secondly it will give them a chance to learn to cope with the crisis, including

community health care management."

The plan initiated by the UN Country Team in collaboration with the Regional Health Bureau, is one of the first of its kind to respond to the emergency in Ethiopia. The deployment, supervision and support was funded by Ireland Aid.

As the last of the three large army style tents each for a different phase of treatment is cleaned, mattresses are washed, and blankets are hung out to air, Sister Tezeta and Yeshihareg move around to examine the remaining children. The students responsibilities include preparing and supervising the enriched therapeutic feeding needed by the children 6 to 8 times a day, carrying out diagnosis and treatment of common childhood illness, especially malaria and conducting nutritional and environmental education.

Seven year old, Sambato, whose mother abandoned him a year before and now stays with his aunt, clings to Yeshihareg's arm. Despite the large baggy sweater covering most of his thin frame, his exposed stick like legs reveal that he has not yet fully recovered. She gives him a hug and a big smile breaks out on his face. He is happy to have a new friend to care for him and provide not just the clinical support to his care but the love and attention that will ultimately bring these malnourished children back to life.

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