

Claire Chadwick
Mdzananda - August 2010

South Africa seemed very far away. A twelve hour flight made it seem even further. But I was used to long journeys – I'd just finished a five year course at university in London and had graduated as a veterinary surgeon. And that is a long journey. Five years of formal training but often preceded by many years of work experience. Hence my determination now to leave the UK and jet off on the trip of a life time to a country I'd always wanted to visit. But it wasn't going to be an ordinary holiday....

A few months before my final exams, I'd got in contact with Jane who runs the Mdzananda clinic just outside Cape Town. I'd always considered volunteering at a 'spay and neuter' clinic abroad but never really got round to doing anything about it. A look at the BVA website produced a list of charity clinics around the world that welcome volunteer vets, and IFAW, who manage Mdzananda, was one of them. The fact that it was in South Africa was definitely a bonus!

The emails flew back and forth and before I knew it, I'd passed my finals and was merely days away from flying to Cape Town to volunteer at Mdzananda for three weeks. I was so excited and just wanted to get out there and get stuck in. I was also nervous – it would be the first time I was to fly on my own and travel to a country I'd never been to and in which I didn't know anyone. I also didn't know quite what to expect! In a nutshell, working at Mdzananda was one of the best things I have ever done.

Jane herself met me at the airport, and though it was early in the morning and I had had very little sleep, I was wide awake with expectation. We went directly to Mdzananda and after a short tour round and meeting lots of new faces, it was straight to work. As a new graduate, I was happy that there were two part time vets covering the week between them, so although I had responsibility and independence, I could always call on someone with more experience.

The idea of the clinic is to provide free or low cost veterinary treatment to people living in Khayelitsha where the clinic is located. Khayelitsha is the largest township in South Africa, located on the Cape Flats, and is thought to be home to 1.5million people. There have been improvements in recent years by way of brick buildings and schools being built in the area, but crime rates are still very high and the majority of people have very little money. The main aim of IFAW and Mdzananda is to sterilise every animal they treat to try and stem the tide of unwanted puppies and kittens which are commonplace around the area, and improve the health of the adult animals. Both dogs and cats are sterilised free of charge. The other main role at Mdzananda is basic treatments such as

vaccinations, worming and flea treatments, which as well as being carried out at the clinic, are done when out on mobile clinics within the Cape Flats.



Claire Chadwick at Mdzananda
Photo: IFAW

Prevention is always better than cure. But as with every veterinary clinic in the world, there are always treatments to be carried out and sick patients to see. Unfortunately, with the large number of dogs roaming around Khayelitsha road traffic accidents are commonplace and throughout my time there I saw many, some with better outcomes than others. The other common cases we saw were cases of babesiosis, a tick borne disease which can lead to severe anemia and if untreated, is fatal. The sad thing is its incidence can be greatly reduced by using preventative treatments against ticks, underlining the clinic's stance on 'prevention is better than cure'.

The clinic will treat pretty much anything that comes through the gate, and though most of the time this is dogs and cats, there is the occasional surprise. One day, towards the end of surgery, we were told a cow was on it's way in with acute poisoning. Sure enough, within the hour, a farm truck turned up with a young heifer on the back, recumbent and twitching. The team leapt straight into action, gaining IV access to provide the cow with fluids and giving a shot of antibiotics. She was also given activated charcoal orally to try and adsorb any remaining poison in her stomach. So we could better monitor her throughout her treatment, she remained with us, kept in the grass dog-run, much to the amusement of passers by! Within a couple of days with lots of TLC from the staff, she began to look a lot better and was soon up on her feet and was happily eating and drinking. We wondered how the farmer was going to transport her home now she had a lot more life in her. No fear – the truck turned up again, and

the cow left as she arrived, lying flat out surrounded by farm hands, but this time looking slightly more cheersed off!

My three weeks at Mdzananda passed far too quickly and I couldn't believe I had to leave. It had really felt like being part of a family working there and the endless offers of braais after work were very welcome!

I urge anyone thinking of volunteering their time in an animal clinic to come to Mdzananda. It was such an amazing experience and I'm already saving up to go back as soon as I can!



Claire Chadwick at Mdzananda
Photo: IFAW