

Echo

COMMENT

New hope to revive seafront

A GREAT many Southend dreams died with the onset of the recession.

Perhaps the biggest casualty turned out to be Marine Plaza, the casino and hotel complex planned for the Golden Mile.

The scheme disappeared from the radar when the development company behind it, JBR Leisure, went into liquidation.

Marine Plaza had the potential to give a huge boost to this fine seafront site, and was regarded as the key to the regeneration of the entire Golden Mile.

"It could be like the domino effect in reverse," the Echo declared two years ago.

"Once this building has risen, others could pop up in a line along this stretch of seafront."

Now, instead of boasting a fine new building, the site casts a forlorn shadow across its neighbours.

Yet there is new hope for the Marine Plaza site, as the Echo reveals today.

A London-based group has bought the land for £2million. Nobody knows how Goldfield Developments plans to make use of the site. But the opportunity to make the location a success story has not gone away.

Nor has the potential to regenerate this stretch of seafront, a process which has already begun, despite the recession. At the other end of the Golden Mile, the reopening of the historic Palace hotel has begun the process.

Today's good news from the Marine Plaza site could accelerate it.

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Poorest patients are given fighting chance

Doctor from south Essex brings hope to Africa's epileptics

By EMMA PALMER
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WHEN you live in a country where staying alive is a day-to-day struggle, conditions like epilepsy are at the bottom of the priority list.

In the West African country of Sierra Leone, more than 50,000 people suffer from the often life-threatening illness.

However, unlike in the UK, they have no medication, get no support and are sometimes shunned by their fellow villagers who think they've been "possessed by the devil" because of their uncontrollable seizures.

But that's all changing, thanks to the efforts of one man, a top consultant from Basildon Hospital.

Dr Radcliffe Lisk has set up Sierra Leone's first epilepsy clinic, in Freetown.

The medic has been praised for his work at Basildon Hospital, where he established an award-winning epilepsy service for south Essex.

Dr Lisk, who is on an unpaid, 12-month sabbatical in Sierra Leone, has worked with the Lumley Government Hospital, in collaboration with UK charity Medical Assistance Sierra Leone, to get the project off the ground.

He is working to establish a comprehensive diagnosis and treatment facility, and train local doctors and nurses.

Dr Lisk, who grew up in Sierra Leone, said: "There is very little understanding of epilepsy in Sierra Leone.

"It is very rarely diagnosed, there is little medication available and sufferers are often socially excluded from their communities.

"The country has some of the poorest health indicators in the world, including the worst maternal mortality rates and high infant mortality.

"The scale of the need is huge and there are large numbers of patients waiting at each session, many more than can be treated.

"In Sierra Leone, people with epilepsy are less likely to receive an education or to gener-



■ Waiting – long queues of people can often be found at Dr Lisk's clinic in Freetown, Sierra Leone

ate a living income and more likely to live in extreme poverty."

The scale of need for Dr Lisk's help is so huge that, at each clinic session he holds, people travel many miles hoping to be seen.

Dr Lisk added: "Epilepsy rates are substantially higher in Sierra Leone than in Western European countries because of a range of factors including birth trauma, cerebral malaria and the consequences of meningitis, as well as injuries relating to the country's ten-year war."

In the UK, epileptics are treated with respect, but in Sierra Leone, the sudden onset in an otherwise normal person raises suspicion they have been possessed by some supernatural force.

Many believe that during these attacks people should keep clear of the sufferer and avoid contact with all body fluids, especially saliva, which is widely believed to be "contagious".

As a result, the patient is often left unattended and may end up with severe injuries, such as fractures or burns, or even die from simple causes like obstructed breathing or inhalation of vomit.

Dr Lisk said: "Many families spend large sums of money on local healers to try to cure the epilepsy.

"Traditional indigenous medicine employs herbal remedies, rituals, spiritual cures or combinations of all these."

One of the patients Dr Lisk has been able to treat so far is 25-year-old Mamusu, who is illiterate and was accompanied to the epilepsy clinic by her ailing mother and younger sister.

Mamusu started school at the age of six, but after only one year she was forced to leave because she started becoming unconscious.

Dr Lisk said: "Her sister said the attacks usually start with shouting, followed by foaming at the mouth and shaking. This left no doubt she was suffering from epilepsy.

"On examining her, she was embarrassed to expose the extensive scarring on her right thigh from burns acquired a few years ago while cooking on an open fire.

"She now spends most of

her time indoors, reluctant to go to the market, and has accepted advice not to use the village well for fear of falling in during an epileptic attack."

However, thanks to Dr Lisk and his team, Mamusu has now been counselled on risks and safety issues and given medication to take regularly.

As a result she is gaining confidence and finally starting to live with her condition.

“The country has some of the poorest health indicators in the world, including the worst maternal mortality rates

HOW YOU CAN HELP

● THE clinic needs a special machine, called an electroencephalogram, to make the diagnosis of epilepsy more effective and accurate.

This small, portable machine is used with a laptop, and costs £14,500.

Dr Lisk is trying to raise the money. Anyone wishing to make a donation can visit www.masierraleone.org.uk

■ Providing support – Dr Radcliffe Lisk

