



## Student Award 2017

# One meal a day for every patient

Photo: Loraine Bodewes

It started with the birth of triplets during Von Salmuth's internship at the hospital in 2015. "Always a special event, because it's so rare." The babies were born healthy, but subsequently failed to grow. "Initially we were afraid that the mother was superstitious, saw them as unnatural somehow, and so wasn't feeding them enough." But there turned out to be something wrong. The mother had so little to eat herself that her breastmilk did not contain enough nutrients. "Here it goes without saying that you get food when you're in hospital. In Shirati there wasn't enough money for that. Patients rely on their families to bring them food, but because it's a regional hospital, people sometimes have to walk two days to get there; they can't just drop by." Von Salmuth bought food from the market herself for the young mother. "Of course, that wasn't a real solution, because I'd be leaving again in a few weeks. So I went to the head of the hospital. It turned out a food programme had been set up at some point, but because there was no real leader, it never got off the ground." Together they calculated what was needed and how much it would cost. "There was already a kind of outside kitchen and a

stove inside. And there were local women willing to cook the food. We started with the most vulnerable patients – children, pregnant women and old people – and gave them one meal a day, five days per week." Back home in Germany, Von Salmuth asked friends and family to donate. "It was right before Christmas, and I was worried it'd be a one-time thing." But the donations kept on coming, the circle of donors expanded and the programme became part of a charitable foundation. Now some sixty percent of the patients at Shirati KMT receive a meal six days

per week. The first thing Von Salmuth wants to do when she returns to Tanzania in November is to figure out how to expand the project to cover all 150 patients. "For that we need a second stove, but getting it there is tricky. The hospital is very remote and stoves like that aren't readily available in the region. It's not something I can organise from here." Next, she wants to secure the future of the project. "At the moment we're largely dependent on donations from private individuals. Perhaps we could set something up with social entrepreneurs? Maybe people can

start growing vegetables near the hospital? I don't know yet, but it's important for this to be a sustainable project."

In this context, Von Salmuth also wants to try to set up a study into the effect of nutrition. "You expect people to recover faster, spend less time in hospital and suffer fewer complications, but you need to have something on paper if you want to draw the government and other parties into the project."

She is also looking at the bigger picture. "This is an issue for many hospitals in remote areas, not just in Africa. Ideally Shirati should serve as a role model for new policies." Is she interested in doing the research herself? "That would be great, although I think that's still a long way off. For now I have to think about making decisions not only for the project but also for me personally. Most of my peers have already graduated and are training to be specialists. They know exactly what lies ahead, whereas for me it's all still wide open. That's a challenge, but it also gives me enormous freedom."

Cleo Freriks