

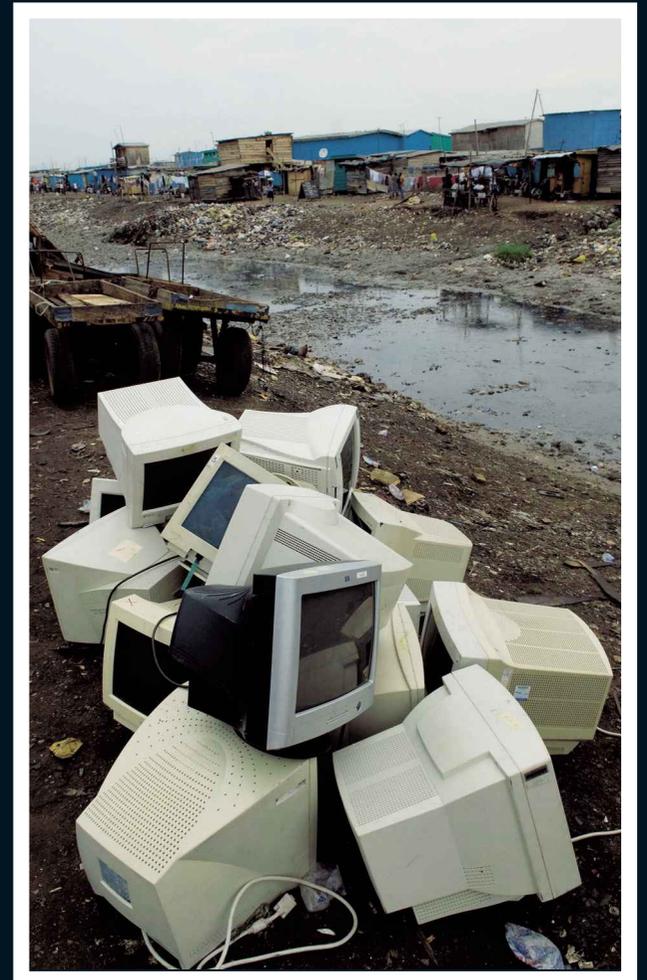
THE DIRTY SECRET



Burning off the plastic insulation from computer wiring to get the copper at a dump in Accra, Ghana. Far right: Thames Gateway NHS Trust computers found at the dump site

ET OF YOUR NHS

UNDER THE
PRETENCE OF
RECYCLING, THESE
NHS COMPUTERS
HAVE BEEN DUMPED
IN GHANA, WHERE
THEIR HARD DRIVES
ARE MINED OF YOUR
CONFIDENTIAL DATA
BY CRIMINAL GANGS...
WHILE CHILDREN DIE
MELTING DOWN THE
HIGHLY TOXIC EMPTY
SHELLS FOR A FEW
PENNIES' WORTH OF
SCRAP METAL.
SPECIAL LIVE
INVESTIGATION BY
JONATHAN GREEN



REPORTAGE

We arrive shortly after the fight. The boy had grovelled in the dirt for mercy, whimpering as blood dripped from his cracked skull. With the computer monitor that had been broken over his head lying on the ground nearby, filthy children with glassy-eyed stares and twisted smirks had stood over him. Some of them had laughed at him as the tears rolled down his dirty face. The boy had been beaten in a vicious quarrel over a length of copper wire probably worth less than 50p.

We were drawn to this place by a doomsday column of black smoke. It darkens an already brooding sky to the east of the city of Accra in Ghana, West Africa. Heads down, looking as inconspicuous as possible, we darted through swarms of beggars and ragged children on the road near Agbogbloshie Market. 'Keep smiling,' said my guide Mike, as we tried to ignore hateful glances from angry-looking men in one of the dangerous slums. 'There are gangsters here, guys from prisons with machetes and cudgels who don't want to be found or photographed. Put the camera away.'

We crossed a polluted river that was swarming with clouds ▶

► of flies and mosquitoes and reeked of human excrement and urine. Then a metallic, sulphurous tang filled my throat, making me gag. As we drew nearer, my right eye began to prickle oddly, then it became harder to draw breath. Where we were heading was highly toxic, even from half a mile away.

We turned off the bustling main road down a rutted, muddy track. Gangs of youths gave us hostile glances. One group sat on their haunches, sucking on marijuana joints and eyeing us from behind dark glasses. We pressed on. Shortly afterwards, we arrived in a poisonous, post-apocalyptic hell – a sprawling, toxic dumping ground stretching for a mile or two. This is the final resting place for your old TV, computer or mobile phone.

Piles of cracked computer monitors sit in rancid pools of noxious green slime. The circuit boards and innards of old PCs leak toxic mercury, beryllium and cadmium, poisoning the earth. Underfoot, my boot crushes a cathode ray tube, releasing a puff of glass particulates around my ankles. The air is poisoned, thick with the highly toxic burning lead and plastics. My lungs begin to ache.

Scampering over these mounds of decaying computers are red-eyed gangs of wild, young boys in rags with names such as Schoolboy and Blackie. It's like William Golding's *Lord Of The Flies*, the allegorical novel about a group of English schoolboys stranded on a desert island after a plane crash who make a disastrous attempt to govern themselves, leading swiftly to violence and murder.

Fights over the spoils of trashed computers break out hourly. At the scene of the earlier scuffle is Kofi Wiafe, a skinny 13-year-old who seems subdued compared to the other boys. He comes from the north of the country. He is just one of hundreds of young boys from poverty-stricken backgrounds who are drawn here to scavenge metal from e-waste, as it's called. Some come from as far afield as Nigeria, Togo and Ivory Coast. At the dump, Kofi is known as Schoolboy because he arrived here after running away from home dressed in his school uniform, the only clothes he had.

He takes us past the whimpering boy into the lawless heart of the dump. 'The fight was nothing,' he says, as he limps along among the broken glass and jagged metal in flip-flops. 'I've seen worse.' The whites of his eyes are so bloodshot it looks like they're bleeding. He blinks back constant tears. There's a dirty, blood-encrusted bandage around the shin of his left leg that hides a septic, pus-filled sore. He cut his leg on a computer monitor he was smashing open with a rock to get the copper wire inside.

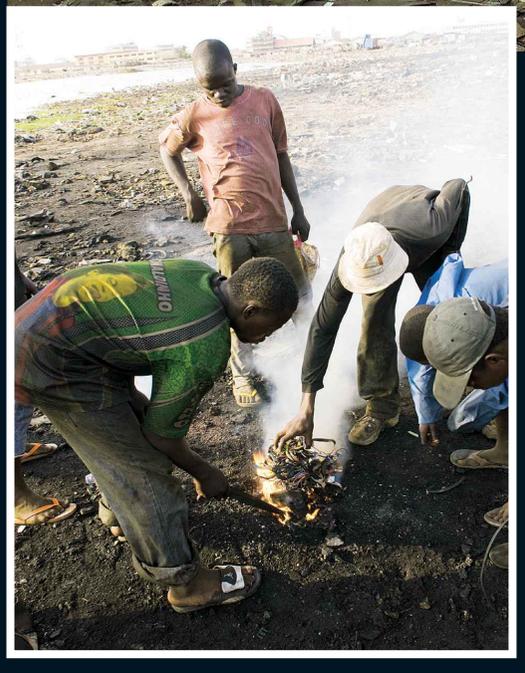
We negotiate a swampy puddle, empty computer cases placed as stepping stones, as the rank water emits oily, burnt-plastic fumes. 'I can't run any more,' says Schoolboy. 'My lungs hurt when I do. I have a headache and I feel sick and I can never sleep. At night my heart beats so hard it feels like it's going to fall off. But even if I'm sick I have to work, otherwise I don't eat. I hate it here.'

Who is exporting this toxic junk and causing the misery? We find a clump of old monitors on the edge of one of the squalid slums that ring the dump site and are shocked by what we see. Stamped clearly on the monitors in blue lettering is the name of the previous owner: Thames Gateway NHS Trust.

Worse still, confidential information about British patients is turning up on these old computers. A few days later, we bought a computer containing medical information alongside 5,000 names and addresses



Above: NHS computer monitors salvaged from the dump in Accra. Left: stoking a fire of computer parts



of patients in England. The computer was just one of a stack of old NHS machines, clearly marked with the names of the various NHS trusts to which they once belonged.

One of the computers we bought for £75 showed the prescriptions issued to patients by a pharmacy in Leeds, West Yorkshire: Viagra, disulphuram for alcohol dependence, the anti-psychotic drug quetiapine and midazolam for anxiety and insomnia. It also revealed the patient's date of birth and personal information.

'This information can be used for all sorts of terrible things: extortion, blackmail, breaking into bank accounts,' says Jim Puckett, head of the Basel Action Network, which campaigns to get the e-waste trade stopped. 'It's dangerous.'

THE JOB OF THE NHS IS TO SAVE LIVES, AND HERE IT IS KILLING CHILDREN IN AFRICA. IT'S SCANDALOUS

The desperate situation here is part of a pattern all over the globe – First World nations dump their electronic rubbish on developing countries, poisoning communities, polluting water sources and causing birth defects, mental retardation and, ultimately, death. This is happening in India, Pakistan, China and other parts of Africa. There is a spiteful cynicism to the trade in Ghana, where once Europeans rapaciously stripped the continent of slaves, gold and salt. Today, the ships bring cargo in rather than out, dumping toxic waste where once they plundered.

My guide, Mike Anane, is founder of Ghana's League Of Environmental Journalists. We examine the NHS monitors. 'It's scandalous,' he says. 'The British NHS's job is to save lives, and here it is killing children in Africa. It is a huge part of the problem at these hazardous waste sites. And here we are talking about computers that come from British doctors who have taken the Hippocratic Oath to save lives.'

Crouched around small piles of old electronics, boys in filthy trousers take crude home-made hammers to monitors and computer cases. When the screens break open there's a dull 'whump' followed by the sound of tinkling glass. Schoolboy says he has seen boys lose fingers and others go blind. None can afford a trip to the hospital, let alone tetanus injections or even antibiotic cream.

All over this desolate wasteland, between the mounds of old computers, the boys tend fires that spew acrid black smoke. We walk to a fire where a huddled group of boys are sullenly stoking a metal pan that splutters with a molten metal. Streaming black smoke roars from the fire and drifts over to the slums where Schoolboy lives. 'It's lead,' the boys tell us, dead-eyed. They're feeding the fire with shattered cathode ray tubes. The average computer monitor contains about 5–7lb of lead. Another fire is fed with tangled, spaghetti-like clumps of wires; they're burning the plastic-encased copper to get at the precious metal. This releases a carcinogenic cloud of toxins.

'The very worst thing that can be done with toxic waste is to burn it in uncontrolled conditions,' Jim

CONFIDENTIAL PATIENT INFORMATION – ON SALE IN GHANA

05/07/07 08:36:09 > 1 Formoterol dry powder inh 60 dose 6mcg for MR. Owing Deleted.
 05/07/07 15:41:53 > 6 Frovatriptan tabs 2.5mg for MRS Owing Deleted.
 06/07/07 15:22:21 > 1 Sharpsbin 1Litre for MR Owing Complete.
 06/07/07 15:25:11 > 250ml Capasal shampoo for MR Owing Complete.
 06/07/07 15:46:18 > 500g Otilatum cream 500g for MISS Owing Complete.
 06/07/07 15:47:06 > 24 Evorel 50 patches 50mcg for MRS Owing Complete.
 06/07/07 16:04:18 > 30 Tamsulosin MR caps 400mcg for Owing Complete.
 06/07/07 16:07:55 > 6 Flucloxacillin caps 500mg for Owing Complete.
 07/07/07 08:59:14 > 5 Morphine sulphate amps 10mg/1ml for MRS Owing Complete.
 07/07/07 09:00:02 > 1 Midazolam amps 10mg/2ml 2ml for MRS Owing Complete.
 07/07/07 09:00:04 > 5 Cyclizine inj 50mg/ml 1ml for MRS Owing Complete.
 09/07/07 08:35:32 > 10g Tri-actocortyl OTIC ointment for MR. Owing Complete.
 09/07/07 16:00:17 > 28 Pregabalin 50mg for MR. Owing Complete.
 10/07/07 14:50:02 > 200g Juvela GF crispbread for MR Owing Complete.
 11/07/07 14:29:59 > 28 Phenytoin caps 300mg for MR Owing Complete.
 11/07/07 15:17:44 > 30 Neoral caps 100mg for MR Owing Complete.
 11/07/07 15:19:00 > 300ml Mebeverine liquid SF 50mg/5ml for MR Owing Complete.
 12/07/07 09:19:18 > 10 Mepore film dressing 10cm x 25cm for Owing Complete.
 12/07/07 09:34:11 > 28 Zemtard XL caps 300mg for MRS Owing Complete.
 12/07/07 09:34:15 > 5 Levemir Flexpen 3ml 100u/ml for MRS Owing Complete.
 13/07/07 09:14:57 > 100ml Prochlorperazine syrup 5mg/5ml for MRS Owing Deleted.
 13/07/07 11:19:41 > 250ml Exorex lotion for MR Owing Complete.
 14/07/07 10:56:30 > 5 Granuflex dress S150 10x10cm for MRS Owing Complete.
 14/07/07 10:56:32 > 6000ml Fresubin Energy Strawberry for MRS Owing Complete.
 16/07/07 08:07:55 > 4 Scholl cl 1 b/knee c/t sand xlg for MS Owing Complete.
 16/07/07 14:04:26 > 28 Aripiprazole tabs 15mg for MR Owing Complete.
 16/07/07 14:31:27 > 84 Ropinirole tabs 2mg for MR. Owing Complete.

Live found a stack of NHS computers for sale on the street in Ghana. They were being sold for £75 each. The machines were clearly marked with stamps from various NHS Trusts, including Gateshead Primary Care Trust, Northumbria Healthcare Trust and NHS Shared Services.

We bought five of these PCs and sent the hard drives to a leading cyber security and computer analysis laboratory, Net Mon GmbH, based in Zurich, Switzerland.

Most of the hard drives were empty, but one contained medical records relating to patients based in Leeds. It came from a computer marked Northumbria Healthcare Trust, although the data found did not relate to its patients but to customers of a pharmacy that had used the computer after the trust had disposed of it.

There were two key databases on this computer. One held 9,042 names and addresses of patients. The other database held 4,330 records of the medicines issued to these patients by a Leeds-based pharmacy between July 30, 2002 and August 23, 2007.

The information is so highly personal we have chosen to reproduce only prescription details here and have disguised the patients' names. If you

cross-reference the databases you can also identify patients' names, dates of birth, home addresses and doctors. Some of the medicines issued are used to treat serious diseases such as alcoholism, depression, anxiety and schizophrenia.

Some data had been deleted from the hard drive and was recovered using special software, but a lot of the information was present at start-up.

Joyce Robins, a co-director of Patient Concern, said it was most alarming that such data was found on a computer that

ended up in Ghana. 'When I get rid of a computer the first thing I do is take out the hard drive and smash it, but clearly this hasn't happened. It doesn't fill me with much hope for the future over the security of our health information.'

Northumbria NHS Trust explained that it destroys all the hard drives of its old computers and then has a contract with NCR to dispose of the rest.

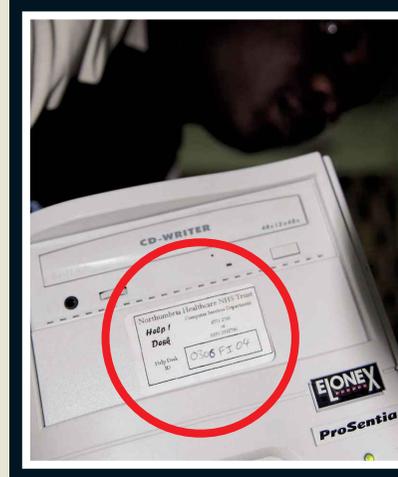
Yvonne Storey, a spokeswoman for Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust, said: 'The PC you found in Ghana was one that

we sent to NCR. The hard drive would have been removed by ourselves as a matter of course. The worst thing from our point of view is that our stickers were still on the computer. We would have expected NCR to have removed them so that the computer was an entirely blank case. But this has not happened in this instance. NCR has denied that this computer went to Africa, but it confirmed that it had received it from our Trust.

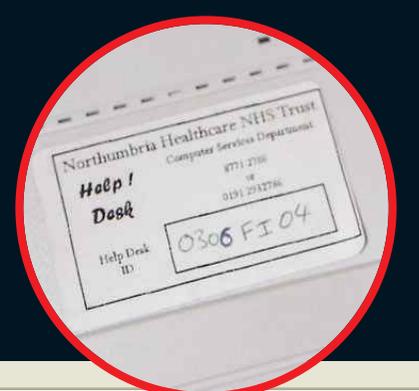
'Concerning Africa, we would not have a problem with this computer being there as long as it was being used properly.'

NCR was also responsible for the PCs from the other trusts we found in Ghana.

Darren Fraser, sales director for NCR, said their refurbished PCs were supplied with clean hard drives, and that he doesn't know how some ended up in Africa. 'Our company is not involved in exporting IT equipment,' he said. 'We do, however, sell working computers to brokers and individuals in the UK. It's possible we would have sold these computers to someone and they might have sold them on to Ghana. If somebody exports these refurbished computers abroad we don't know what happens to them and we don't need to know what happens.' ■



One of the old NHS Trust computers that *Live* discovered on sale in Ghana, complete with confidential patient information (above) on the hard drive



Puckett tells me later. Puckett's life has been threatened several times in Nigeria and China, where he has filmed the human cost of this trade. 'Combustion releases toxic metals – lead, beryllium, cadmium, mercury – into the atmosphere. Likewise, burning creates some of the most carcinogenic and toxic substances known, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, dioxins and furans. Just the lead alone released by such burning will have a devastating impact on the development of children and their central nervous systems. We

can expect more infant mortality, birth defects and brain dysfunction within just a few years, particularly among those living near the dumps and working in this nightmarish recycling business.'

Burning lead is extremely hazardous. Scientific studies have shown that those exposed to lead poisoning are more likely to be aggressive and impulsive. In fact, US economist Rick Nevin believes high violent-crime statistics can be directly traced to lead. He has researched this link in nine countries. 'It's stunning

how strong the association is,' he has claimed. 'Sixty-five to 90 per cent or more of the substantial variation in violent crime in all these countries was explained by lead.' It's one explanation for why fights break out with such regularity here at the dump.

In the dead of night, lorries arrive at Agbogbloshie, often with their headlights off. They dump cracked and broken old computers and TVs. We're told it's much too dangerous to visit the dump at night to witness this. 'After dark you are playing with your life,' ►

► says Mike. ‘There are seriously tough and dangerous people involved in this.’

At 6am in the grey light of dawn, and sometimes earlier, gaggles of boys acting like vultures swarm over the circuit boards and cracked monitors from the previous night’s illegal dumping. The crazed scramble for anything of value begins.

From the age of four, these young boys scavenge metal for muscular men in their early twenties. They are Fagin-type characters. ‘They beat us when they think we have stolen their copper,’ says Israel, a filthy 14-year-old.

As I photograph a pile of old, yellowing monitors, several men start shouting, eyes blazing with indignation. One, in wraparound shades and a football shirt, is clearly the leader. ‘You! White man! Get away from those.’ After some placatory words that ease the hostility, we discover that he calls himself Sharp Dollar. He runs a fleet of seven carts made from old car wheels and rusty metal, which the boys in his employ use to haul out junk. Around here that’s like having a fleet of Mercedes. ‘Business is good,’ he says, allowing himself a grin.

According to some reports, it’s possible to extract more gold from a ton of electronic circuitry than from 17 tons of gold ore.

Like other dealers, Sharp Dollar has an old-fashioned red scale next to a rusty container. He pays the boys two Ghanaian cedis – just under £1 – for 1lb of copper. For Schoolboy that could be several days’ work and countless monitors to crack open. Later, Sharp Dollar sells each pound of copper for 25 cedis, around £11. A shadowy group of buyers from all over the world descends upon the site to exploit this ultra-cheap labour. All the boys know the person known as the Chinaman who comes round demanding sackloads of circuit boards.

Later in the day I meet Suresh, from Delhi, India. Despite his expensive trainers and stylish T-shirt, he looks like an 18th-century slavemaster as he stands on top of an old freezer, directing the ragged boys with curt commands. They are covered in soot and sweat, loading his truck with the scrap. It’s slavery by any other name.

But Suresh isn’t concerned about human rights. ‘We have to watch them,’ he says, irritably. ‘Other boys come and steal the things we’re trying to load onto the lorry.’

He says the scrap metal is bound for Dubai, where he can get a high price for it, although he won’t admit how much. ‘We come here ten times a week,’ he says, with a wolfish chuckle. ‘Recycling is good business!’

You will probably use your computer for about three or four years – more if you really don’t mind using an outdated machine. After that it’s likely it’ll join the 6.6 million tons of e-waste that’s unaccounted for every year in the EU alone.

Governments around the world became so concerned about the dumping of hazardous waste from First World countries in developing ones that in 1989 they agreed an international treaty, the Basel Convention, which was supposed to combat this. There are now 170 countries involved in the treaty; Great Britain is a signatory, and so is Ghana. The only three countries that have signed it and not ratified it are Afghanistan, Haiti and the United States, the



Above: toxic waste is pumped into the sea at Korle Goono, a fishing community near Accra. Left: children search for computer components

neighbours, it is illegal, it causes death and disease, and it must be stopped.’

At the heart of the problem is a global scam. ‘Middlemen go round to schools or banks and offer to take away their old computers for a £5 recycling fee,’ explains Puckett. They are told the PCs will be disposed of environmentally, or, if they are still usable, given to charities in the developing world. ‘The middlemen then sell container loads to traders in countries such as Ghana, filling them 25 per cent with stuff that works, and 75 per cent with stuff that’s broken, which would be illegal to dump in the US or the UK.’

In Ghana, the broken junk can be dumped for free. The middlemen get away with the scam by pretending all the computers are usable. By shipping them to Ghana they save a small fortune, as it would cost a considerable amount to scrap them in countries such as the UK, where they would have to be disposed of in an environmentally responsible manner. Ghanaians accept the situation because they get some working computers. ‘For everybody it’s a win-win, but the environment bears the cost,’ says Puckett.

No one knows how much turns up in developing countries, as the trade is illegal and the true figures are hidden. However, in Africa, Ghana’s near neighbour Nigeria is also home to a thriving illegal dumping trade. Professor Oladele Osibanjo, director of the Basel Convention Regional Co-ordinating Centre in Nigeria, estimates that half a million computers arrive there every month. ‘When you are poor you accept anything,’ he says. And every time technology takes another leap forward – making working electronics obsolete – it’s people in the developing world who bear the cost.

‘In the West they are switching to digital TV from ►

**WE CAN'T SIMPLY HAND
OVER OUR TOXIC JUNK
AND LOOK THE OTHER WAY.
IT'S ILLEGAL AND CAUSES
DEATH AND DISEASE**

► analogue. That means tons of old TVs will probably head straight to Nigeria in the coming months.'

For years, Osibanjo has been campaigning to stop the trade, but despite telling companies of the death they were exporting to Africa, it was only when he told them sensitive data from hard drives was falling into the wrong hands that they began to attempt to restrict their practices.

'In Nigeria we found sensitive documents from the World Bank and we found stuff from child-protection services in the US, where children had been taken away from families,' he says. 'IBM didn't really care about the waste issue, but once we told them about data from their hard drives that can be used for all sorts of terrible things – from extortion to hacking into bank accounts – they did something at last.'

Benjamin thinks for a minute, and then his face cracks into a grin. 'Ah, you want unformatted hard drives, eh?' he says, pulling a mobile phone out of the back pocket of his jeans. 'You want MasterCard, Visa numbers? Bank account details and addresses? No problem.'

Benjamin is one of a number of faceless middlemen in Ghana who buy and sell computers. He knows that many are looking for computers with unwiped hard drives that contain sensitive information that can be used to extort money, steal someone's identity or even rummage in someone's bank account. He offers us unformatted hard drives for £20 each. 'No guarantees, though,' he says.

We have made our way to the port of Tema, near Accra, where thousands of containers are unloaded every day. A corrupt port official let us in to see for ourselves the container after container of electronics. Outside the port's security perimeter, makeshift stalls have been set up on every street, selling battered Pentium II and III computers for around £75 each.

On a rough patch of reddish dirt, under flapping awnings, men are plugging PCs into car batteries and installing pirated versions of Windows software. Seated behind a bank of computers under a whipping plastic sheet, wearing a vibrant patterned blouse and dripping with gold jewellery, is Michelle (she refused to give her full name). She has a thick north London accent. She used to work at King George Hospital in Ilford, north east London, taking blood samples and performing other administrative duties, before realising she could make a killing in the burgeoning computer-export business. 'I have a container full of computers at the docks that I have to pay duty on,' she says. 'But more are arriving every day.'

A cursory look at her computers reveals where they're from: Wakefield and Pontefract Community Health NHS Trust, South West Yorkshire Mental Health NHS Trust, Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust. In fact, directly from hospitals all over the UK. They would be prime targets for fraudsters (see panel, page 23).

'Yeah,' says Michelle. 'I haven't touched the hard drives.' One computer is password-protected. 'No problem,' says one of her co-workers, who whips off the cover and prises a battery out with a screwdriver. 'Not password-protected any more. Ha!'

Returning to Agbogbloshie, we decide to follow the blackened run-off from the dump to its ultimate destination. A lagoon near the dump has been turned an inky black. Its contents flow into a rusty pipe a foot in



One of scores of second-hand computer shops on Darkuman Road, the western outskirts of Accra

diameter that leads out to sea. A thundering cascade of tar-coloured toxic water, millions of gallons, flows into the Gulf of Guinea and the South Atlantic, turning the sea black.

A forlorn band of people from the suburb of Korle Gonno, a fishing community, are scratching around in the rubbish trying to find fish to eat. Fifty yards away the pipeline pumps its deadly cocktail into the ocean.

Olu Kweik, 27, is a fisherman like his father and his grandfather before him. These days his nets are full of garbage, old TV monitors, circuit boards and other junk. 'The nets are twice as heavy these days,' he says. 'Not with fish – that is about half of what it was – but with rubbish. We can't work or make money. We are starving.' He is with 20 other people, who begin to argue in the background about how to divide up the fish they've picked out of the rubbish over the past two hours, which now sits in a large steel bowl.

Away from all this suffering and misery, and not far from where the new £15 million presidential palace is being constructed, are the government buildings. Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is a magisterial edifice housing a warren of offices.

We ask to speak to someone about the dire situation we've witnessed, but the security guard on reception says that the media spokesperson is away at World Environmental Day in Wellington, New Zealand, and is unable to talk. However, when we go back outside, we find him, laughing and joking with some colleagues in a leafy glade not far from his office. Caught, he reluctantly agrees to speak.

For half an hour, EPA press spokesperson Anthony

**AFTER JUST A FEW DAYS
NEAR THE DUMP SITE
MY HEART RACES AT
NIGHT, MY SKIN ITCHES
AND I CAN'T SLEEP**

Abadidoo, a long-limbed, wry man in an open-necked plaid shirt, sits at his desk dodging, ducking and feebly trying to joke his way out of my questions. He refuses to let me record our conversation. 'This is not a crisis,' he says.

Then he uses the standard phrases of bureaucrats the world over. 'We are putting in a process... I have to talk to the guy who is working on this, but he has been away on vacation... We need to do a baseline study to show us guidelines on how we should deal with this waste.' It's not exactly convincing.

'I will not put a deadline on when we are going to sort this out,' he declares. 'I will not stick my neck out. If I do, people will say I am not straightforward and that I am a liar.'

After all this, he concludes, 'Progress has to come through a long and crooked process.' Then he stands up awkwardly and grasps my hand. 'And, thank you for the grilling,' he says politely.

Luke Upchurch, of UK-based Consumers International, which represents more than 220 consumer groups in 115 countries, is more concerned. 'It's a disgrace that the Basel Convention is not being policed,' he says to me later. 'The legislation is there – it just needs to be enforced.' In the meantime he is fighting to get electronics giants to take responsibility for their products. 'Companies such as Sony and LG need to have a proper policy in place to dispose of computers, cellphones and old TVs, in the same way that car batteries or ink cartridges are processed.'

Two miles from the dump is a rare patch of beach that is unpatrolled by the security guards who protect tourists and businessmen at the ritzy hotels from the slum children. It's known locally as Boola beach; Boola meaning rubbish.

The currents are too dangerous for swimming, but on Sunday it's thick with children from the slums who feel it's worth risking the dangerous currents just to be able, for once, to wash off the toxins from the dump and swim in the sea.

We find Schoolboy and his friends, all in ragged shorts, lying in the sand. It's the first time I've ever seen them smile. Covered in salt and sand, they start to speak about their dreams; how they want to be soldiers, policemen, racing drivers. Schoolboy says he wants to be an airline pilot. He tells me he sees planes flying over the dump, going far away. 'I would like that job,' he says.

But mostly he would just like to go home. 'I'm saving up to get out of here,' he continues. 'It's all been a mistake – it's horrible.' He needs about £10 for the bus journey back up north. But that could take weeks of breaking monitors and melting circuit boards. Even then he isn't hopeful he'll be able to make such a grand sum of money.

When I leave Ghana, I fly over the dump site and see the ground turned black and the smouldering fires sending poisonous smoke up into the sky. After just a few days there my heart races at night, my skin itches and I can't sleep, and there's a heaviness to my breathing. A small taste of what the boys forced into these conditions have to endure.

I imagine Schoolboy down below looking up at the plane, thinking about his own escape. But all I can see from the air is that the deathly black slick running into the sea from the dump site now reaches Boola beach. The one place Schoolboy can escape to is also being poisoned – the toxins are in everything he comes into contact with. There is no escape. ■