

Report on International Volunteer Attachment to Banda Aceh **July – September 2005**

On Boxing Day 2004, I was stunned to wake up to the terrible images of the South East Asian Tsunami on my television. I have close links to the region and wondered if I could be of any use in the aftermath of the devastation. I happen to speak Indonesian reasonably fluently and thought that some of my skills as an SpR in psychiatry may be of use.



Banda Aceh: Graffiti reads, “ The owner of this house is still alive”

Initially, the situation seemed quite chaotic as governments and international agencies focused on just keeping people alive, but as the situation settled over the first few months, it became clear that mental health would be one of the priority areas in the reconstruction and rehabilitation programme. I put my name forward to a number of NGOs and international agencies and I was pleased to hear back from the World Health Organization (WHO) that they would be able to use my skills.



Outpatient Department at the Banda Aceh Mental Hospital

I have also been involved in the College as a representative on the CTC and approached people for support and advice. The Board of International Affairs has been promoting an International Volunteer Programme (IVP) to encourage members of the College to contribute to the development of psychiatry around the globe, but in particular to aid mental health service development in poorer nations. It was suggested that I could use some of the mechanisms of this scheme to facilitate an attachment with the World Health Organization.



Planning Meeting for the Implementation of Community Mental Health Nursing

The support and advice I received from the college was outstanding. From an administrative point of view, it can be quite daunting navigating the process of arranging an accredited out of programme experience (OOPE) from a Higher Training Scheme. I wanted to organize it so that the experience would count towards my training, which meant arranging unpaid leave from my trust, getting permission from my SpR tutor, approval from my post-graduate dean, as well as educational approval from GOAPSAC, the College's Specialist Training Committee. It all needed a fair bit of co-ordination, and having the backing of the College certainly eased the process.



Community Mental Health Nurse Training

Mentoring and moral support are probably more important than I realized before I left. As part of the IVP, Prof. Rachel Jenkins was kind enough to act as a “virtual-supervisor” via email, which was very helpful. Additionally, the college put me in touch with members from the International Divisions of the College. Prof. Deva, the secretary of the Western Pacific division of the College, met me en-route to Aceh and gave me invaluable advice and support throughout the course of the attachment.



Training GPs in Mental Health

The actual job with the WHO was amazing. I was part of a small multi-disciplinary team tasked to work with the health authorities to build a mental health system in the province. This involved meeting a lot of doctors, nurses, academics and health administrators to build a consensus on what would work best in the local environment. People were particularly interested in me sharing my experience of the community-based psychiatry we currently practice here in the UK, as Indonesia still has a largely custodial / asylum based approach to mental health, and discussing how we could adapt some of the underlying principles to the cultural and resource realities of Aceh. We worked on developing and introducing a primary care based system. I was involved in training and had some input into a new nursing curriculum. Before I left, I was very proud to see the introduction of Indonesia's first community mental health nurses and see them treat their first patients.



Acehnese mental health professionals visiting a Community Mental Health Team in neighboring Malaysia

I have been back in Britain now for a few months and I have had a little time to reflect on my three months in Aceh. I suppose the biggest impact has been on my personal view of the world. As doctors, we see a lot of pain and suffering, but I never imagined I would see suffering and destruction on the scale of post-Tsunami Aceh. Yet, what was even more moving was to witness the strength and resilience of ordinary people who have been through an extra-ordinary experience. Most of the Acehnese I worked with had lived day-to-day with their own personal tragedies, while putting everything into building something new for the future.

Professionally, I have returned home with greater confidence in the depth and breadth of skills I have acquired over these years of training. This experience has also made me look at my own practice here in the UK. For example, I have been looking afresh at what is considered “community psychiatric care” and wondering if there are lessons we can learn from the developing world and apply them to my work in London. I also have a clearer insight into difficulties, constraints and opportunities that arise from developing a service, which can sometimes be hard to appreciate when you are caught up in a busy clinical job in the NHS.



Acehnese children in a survivors' camp

I would thoroughly recommend the International Volunteers' Programme to any Specialist Registrar who is considering it. I also think it is a great opportunity for clinicians, academics or administrators in the developing world who are looking to build and develop their mental health service, and who may need someone with clinical experience from the UK for additional input. UK Specialist Registrars are quite a unique resource as they usually have about 5 years of specialist training in psychiatry and have passed their Membership Examinations, yet are able to spend up to a year on a project.

If you would like more information on the scheme, please contact Joanna Carroll at the College (JCarroll@rcpsych.ac.uk). I am happy to be contacted personally, through Joanna, if anyone would like any additional information or advice.

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