

REPORT FROM JAFFNA AND TRINCOMALEE, SRI LANKA

Tsunami struck South East Asia on 26th December 2004. This caused not only a great deal of physical damage to property and life but also a number of acute physical and mental health problems.

Relief organisations responded to this need swiftly, but with time the long term effect, particularly in mental health surfaced.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, 20 years of fighting, came to an 'end' with a cease fire being declared between the two warring parties in February 2002.

Sri Lanka with a population of 19 million has around 30 qualified psychiatrists. However, NGO's both local and international, provide counselling particularly to the victims affected by the war.

The Royal College of Psychiatrist UK hearing of the enormous need for mental health services requested Mental Health professionals working in NHS to be given leave by their respective employers to work in Tsunami affected areas.

A small team consisting of a consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Dr Shanthy Parameswaran, Child Psychotherapist, Dr Harriet Calvert from UK and a Psychoanalyst from USA, Michigan, Dr Alan Krohn, (international medical health organisation, USA) got together to provide psychological services for children and adolescent which were critically lacking in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Dr S Parameswaran and Dr H Calvert are on the executive committee of the Sri Lanka UK Trauma Group. This is a charitable organisation based in London dedicated to facilitating mental health services to the war affected areas. They responded to the Tsunami which caused an additional burden to those already affected by the war.

The team's aim was to carry out an intensive training program for counsellors who work with children and adolescents following the tsunami and war victims in the underserved areas of Jaffna and Trincomalee.

In consultations with the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Jaffna (Shanthiham, a centre for health and counselling affiliated with the Psychiatry Department and FRO - Family Rehabilitation Organisation in Colombo and Trincomalee) we organised and carried out two intensive programs one in Jaffna and one in Colombo to improve the skills of psychosocial workers working with children and adolescent victims of the tsunami and of the decades of civil war. The program consisted of five days of training in child and adolescent development, therapeutic communication with children and adolescents, the effects of trauma and loss on children and adolescents, common mental health problems and its management. These content areas were complemented by discussion of cases the counsellors encountered in their various settings, including the tsunami disaster areas. Finally, each day of training included smaller groups in which the counsellors had the opportunity to explore their own personal reactions to the areas being explored, facilitating the kind of personal growth necessary for well rounded development of a mental health worker. This last experience turned out to be unexpectedly rich and important for many of the workers themselves had been psychologically affected by the tsunami and the war and feelings stirred up regularly in their work needed to be understood for them to remain emotionally involved with the victims they were trying to help.

While the long-term impact of what we did is hard to determine just after completing the training we provided, our impressions and the feedback from both the trainees (who were given feedback forms at the conclusion of each day of training) and from the staff at Shanthiham and FRO was that our work was found to be very valuable. Our group has been invited back to do more training and service. Our future project involves doing training in trauma and psychotherapy for the psychiatric residents at the Teaching Hospital in Jaffna. Another is to do training in the assessment and treatment of suicidality, a major problem in Sri Lanka even before the tsunami.

The trip was a very rich and rewarding experience. We learned a great deal during the trip and we hope we made a positive contribution. What made it more enjoyable was the fact that the trainees were all so eager to learn.