

Visit to Tiruvannamalai 17th February – 31st March 2014

Lucy Furniss

I have just returned from a truly wonderful six weeks in Tiruvannamalai, experiencing first-hand the fantastic work of Sylvia Wright and her team. This was my first trip to India and a great introduction to the diversity, spirituality and chaos of this vibrant country. As a doctor, my main objective was to experience a healthcare system within a developing country. This, I achieved during my trip as there were many apparent similarities and differences between healthcare in India and the UK. However, I took so much more from this trip. The time spent with the children at the school, the long chats with Sylvia, the interesting journeys to and from the hospital (by ambulance, bus, car and milk van!) and getting to know the staff and learning about their lives, all contributed to make this a very special, rewarding and memorable experience.

Rangammal School for hearing impaired children

Sylvia set up the boarding school in 1996, aimed at providing a free and quality education to around 200 deaf children within the local community. The children come to the school from the age of 4 and stay up until their final exams when they are 16. Most of the children do very well in their exams and go on to higher education and university.

My first impression of the school was the happy environment full of colour, smiles and noise! As most of the children are boarders, they form strong friendships – the boys loved playing cricket together and the girls watching their Tamil serials! They were very hard workers and during my stay the XIIth std students had their final exams and would often be studying late in to the night.

Mr Raja and his team of teachers were fantastic and I was so impressed with all their hard work. In the run up to the exams, the teachers were staying late to run revision classes. The fantastic new computer lab was opened during my stay and will be a huge asset to the education provided. Many will go on to study computer courses at university and this will really contribute to their job opportunities following education.

I was very impressed with the children's speech and lip reading skills. Most children now have a digital programmed hearing aid – a project run by the Trust and this has really improved their speech. They were also very good at English and keen to teach me signs!

Ramana Maharishi Rangammal Memorial Hospital

220 bed hospital with out-patient facilities, operating theatre, dialysis unit and visiting specialist Consultants. The patients pay a very small contribution for the service and in return receive high quality standard of care. The hospital was very clean and friendly and had large, open Florence Nightingale style wards.

It was very interesting for me to see the differences in the types of illnesses and the different presentations compared to patients in the UK. Generally, the patients in India were more medically minded and so come to the hospital with a complaint and want some immediate medicine/injection to cure it. The patients have difficulty managing long term problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure due to a limited understanding of the conditions and poor compliance taking long term medication. Because of that, I saw a lot of complications of diabetes/high blood pressure such as kidney failure and strokes in patients in their 40/50's which we do not see in the UK.

I was also exposed to more tropical diseases – malaria, TB, chikungunya virus and neurocysticercosis which I have not seen before in the UK. It was an education for me learning how these diseases present and are managed within the hospital. Often, patients present late with their

illnesses and so have more developed pathology and more obvious clinical signs. It was a really useful experience for me to examine the patients and their signs, some of which I had previously only read about in textbooks.

Sylvia is very much involved in all aspects of the hospital and has a team of doctors and nurses who work hard to provide a good service. There is also a nursing college where Sylvia is passing on her hands-on approach style teaching to train these nurses to a high standard. I was pleased to be involved with this and enjoyed teaching anatomy classes with a traditional chalk and blackboard lesson!

Lasting impressions

Overall this was a wonderful trip and I feel privileged to have been welcomed in to this community. A huge thank you to Sylvia for having me as a guest. She is a true inspiration and the work she has done and is continuing to do, is providing invaluable advantages to thousands of people within the community. Her team of hard-working staff were fantastic and made me feel so welcome. Thank you to Vijayan, Raja and Jayaraj at the hospital for organising me and involving me in all aspects of the work at the hospital. A special thank you to Raja, Stella and Miss Daisy at the school who ensured my stay was comfortable and that I was well fed! Thank you to the The Trust for introducing me to Sylvia. They are doing a fantastic job making all Sylvia's work possible and I hope to become involved with their work in the UK.

Continuing involvement

- Sponsorship – I would like to sponsor Ummashafiya, a lovely, smiley, animal-loving nine year old girl at the school. I look forward to hearing about her progress at the school and am delighted that I can contribute towards her on-going education.
- Fund raising – I am running the Great North Run in September this year. I would like to raise some money for the Trust (aiming for £1000!)
- Medical Electives – following on from my fantastic experience at the hospital, I think it would be a really valuable experience for medical students. I would be interested in establishing a medical elective programme that I believe would benefit the medical students and hopefully become a source of funds for the hospital.