

Johanne Walker

## OT Tour of Sri Lanka

In January this year, the author and seven others met in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to join a tour specifically designed for occupational therapists. There were six occupational therapists in total, three from Australia and three from Britain, and two accompanying family members. Dinner on the first evening, at the splendid colonial Galle Face Hotel, Colombo, confirmed that regardless of nationality, the shared interests and perspectives of occupational therapists quickly results in close and amicable bonds. Our group was extremely fortunate to have Marilyn Pattison, current president of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, as the designated leader.

Over the following two weeks, we visited healthcare facilities and met Sri Lankan colleagues, all the while increasing our

knowledge of the Sri Lankan health system. On several occasions, we were immersed in Sri Lankan culture and thoroughly enjoyed the varied spiritual, environmental and archaeological experiences the country has to offer.

The professional goals for the trip were: to gain historical and cultural insights into the provision of healthcare services, including occupational therapy services, within urban and rural Sri Lanka; to compare and contrast the provision of healthcare services within Sri Lanka with those of our own countries; and to provide opportunities to form partnerships or links with Sri Lankan health professionals.

A memorable visit was to the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Colombo, where we were warmly welcomed by

senior management and the president and members of the Sri Lankan Society of Occupational Therapists. The welcome was a traditional one where we each received special leaves, ceremoniously presented with two hands. We were greeted by scores of enthusiastic, friendly and mainly young occupational therapists from across Sri Lanka. Before we toured the hospital's treatment facilities, we gathered to hear the president of the Sri Lankan Society of Occupational Therapists, Mr Nimal Liyange, explain the historical development of occupational therapy in Sri Lanka. Other speakers included the medical director of the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dr Jayaruwan Bandara and Marilyn Pattison, who provided insights into the scope of occupational therapy and the role of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists. During the tour of the National



Welcome banner with tour participants, National Rehabilitation Hospital meeting



*Tour participants & OT staff, Nuwara Eliya General Hospital.*

Rehabilitation Hospital we became aware that most of the equipment required by individuals undergoing rehabilitation was engineered and manufactured on-site in the therapy workshops. Impressively, this even extended to manual wheelchairs. It was truly gratifying and humbling to experience the high regard that the Sri Lankan occupational therapists offered to our group in general and particularly to Marilyn, in her role as president of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists.

Another visit included experiencing a less Western way of healthcare. At the Lavinia Ayurvedic Hospital, Colombo, diagnosis and treatment is based on ancient ayurvedic principles and traditions, using the many and varied herbs and plants available in Sri Lanka. Other visits in Colombo included the Rainbow Centre, with its focus on children with developmental disabilities and the

National Institute for Mental Health, where the importance of meaningful occupation was enthusiastically embraced and practiced. Outside the capital, we visited a rural health clinic and the remains of an ancient ayurvedic hospital in Sigirigya, the Sirimavo Bandaranaike Children's Hospital in Peradeniya, the Nuwara Eliya General Hospital, Nuwara Eliya and the Karapitya Hospital in Galle, which played a crucial role during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. At every facility, the welcome was always warm and hospitable and we never failed to be impressed by the therapists' knowledge and enthusiasm for the services they offered and their quiet pride in being occupational therapists.

The Sri Lankan Society of Occupational Therapists has been a full member of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists since 1992. The main training facility is at the University of Kelaniya,

Colombo, where a four-year bachelor degree in occupational therapy is offered. Interestingly, we learnt that in the past a number of Sri Lankan occupational therapists gained their qualifications overseas. Supporting countries, such as Cuba, have provided scholarships to allow individuals to train in occupational therapy before returning home to Sri Lanka to practice. Less surprising, the British Association of Occupational Therapists has played a significant part in assisting the development of the occupational therapy profession and occupational therapy services in Sri Lanka, since the late 1950s.

Sri Lankan occupational therapists mainly practise within acute in-patient and rehabilitation settings, under a medical model, offering services to those with musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis, spinal cord injury, stroke or related neurological conditions, mental health conditions and children with developmental delays or learning issues, using skills in paediatrics, splinting, rehabilitation techniques, adapted equipment and group work. To date, occupational therapists in Sri Lanka currently do not offer home assessments or community-based work.

Travelling on a themed professional tour with a group of like-minded occupational therapists was a wonderful way to not only gain insight into occupational therapy services in a developing nation, but also to have an interesting holiday – one that included the more usual visitor occupations of visiting temples, ancient archaeology sites, hill station tea plantations, national parks and, of course, gemstone providers.

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