

BAHT Charitable Bursary - 2009

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I am very grateful to BAHT for awarding me a Charitable Bursary which was used to sponsor my journey to India in April 2009.

I was returning to the Anandwan Community, in Central India, as part of the continuing Hand Reconstructive Surgery Project that we have been running there annually since 2000.

Originally established for the care and support of people who had leprosy, Anandwan nowadays also embraces the care and support of many others who have varying disabilities. It is a most remarkable place.

I travelled with an occupational therapist colleague. We have both been part of this project since the beginning, and are therefore now very familiar with the work involved in the post-operative phase. With the list of the operations performed we are able to predict what splints we will need to make and can therefore equip ourselves accordingly. We take all the materials that we will need, plus additional stock for any other patients who will inevitably arrive during our Therapy week.

From my perspective, this April visit was specifically to treat the post operative patients and also to review the progress of the Limb Fitting Unit which we have sponsored in the community through our charity New Limbs for New Lives.

After travelling for 20 hours we arrived at Anandwan at about 9:0pm on the Sunday evening and following a quick supper, it was straight to bed, then up on Monday morning for an 8:00 am start at the hospital.

The patients arrived as planned and we saw all 18 patients on the first day for removal of plaster, skin care, scar massage, exercise instruction, splint manufacture, and instruction in functional exercises within the protection of the splints.

14 patients had undergone tendon transfer surgery, and 2 had complex scar revision following burns contractures

Tendon transfer surgery had been performed for intrinsic reconstruction to correct ulnar and/or median claw deformity, and opponensplasty to restore thumb function.

Patient ages ranged from 14 to the over 60s. There were no complications. All wounds had healed without problems, and all plasters had remained in situ over the six post operative weeks.

These people continue to amaze me with their lack of complications following complex surgery, and with their ability to mobilize so easily following, in some cases, multiple tendon transfers. There is a rapid understanding of how to recruit the new tendon functions. Their ability to manage all their post operative period so well even when living in challenging situations, and in this instance, dealing with extreme temperatures,

is quite remarkable. The patients are very respectful of their surgery and are delighted to achieve restored hand function. It is a life changing situation, opening up doors that were previously closed, either due to the disability of poor hand function, or to the stigma that still accompanies the all too recognizable hand deformity that leprosy leaves.

We worked steadily throughout the week, in the unbelievable temperatures of 45/46 degrees Celsius, and even the local people were finding it very hot. We were both pleased how well we coped with the heat, neither of us ever having experienced these temperatures before.

By the end of the week we were confident that all the patients were comfortable in their splints and able to carry on with their self care programme for the next two months. We were fortunate to have translation assistance from Singh, the prosthetist who is now working at Anandwan, and we were also joined by a Swiss pre- medical student who came to observe all the therapy sessions.

Undoubtedly the Hand Surgery Project March/ April 2009 was a great success and it has again been a wonderful professional and personal experience to be part of it.

I have presented our work in India to therapist colleagues and to the wider general public on several occasions, and do plan to continue with this aspect of our charitable work.

I owe grateful thanks to BAHT for the availability of the Charitable Bursary and for assisting me in continuing with this project.