

Good Morning Vietnam

From Marie Atherton...

When I was asked to write an article for *Speak Out* that described what I'd been doing in Vietnam, I was a little daunted to say the least. So much has happened since my arrival nearly 10 months ago, that it's difficult to know where to begin. So I thought I would start at the beginning, write what came into my head, and then call on the *Speak Out* editors to apply their expertise and edit like mad. And this is what I've come up with.



Marie Atherton teaching in Vietnam

Firstly, a little background information. From 2005-June 2010, I held the position of Senior Advisor Professional Issues at Speech Pathology Australia's National Office in Melbourne. I was responsible for the management of ethical complaints to the Association and the development of Association papers and submissions. It was a busy, stimulating position, yet I still wished to broaden my perspective on a range of issues that extended beyond speech pathology. Through my travels I had developed a strong interest in the challenges facing countries with developing economies and without access to the same resources as Western countries. I was often astounded by the inequities that existed. I thought the best way to improve my knowledge and understanding of these issues was to undertake formal study, so in 2008 I commenced a Masters in International Development, with the intention of undertaking work that would help address this inequity.

It was also at this time that I happened to be speaking with Associate Professor Lindy McAllister, a Life Member of Speech Pathology Australia and also a senior member of the Association's Ethics Board. It was during our discussion of an ethical issue that my current studies in International Development came into the conversation. Lindy has worked for many years in countries with developing economies such as Vietnam and Africa, and she immediately suggested that my skills and experience in speech pathology and my studies in International Development could be combined. Lindy encouraged me to contact Mrs. Sue Woodward of Trinh Foundation Australia to find out more about how this could take place.

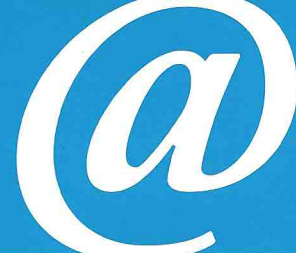
What I found out was that Trinh Foundation Australia (TFA) is a not-for-profit NGO directed by Sue, Lindy and Dr Aziz Khan (and since December 2010, Dr Alison Winkworth). Established in 2008, the goal of TFA is to enable all adults and children in Vietnam who have communication and swallowing problems to have access to the services of a speech therapist. More information regarding the background and objectives of Trinh Foundation Australia can be found at <http://trinhfoundation.org/>

What followed my initial contact with Sue can only be described as 'whirlwind'. In February 2009, and then again in June 2009 I travelled to HCMC to assist in the clinical education component of a 'Short Course in Speech Therapy' that was being offered by TFA, in conjunction with the HCMC ENT Hospital. At that time, no formal qualification in speech therapy was available in Vietnam, yet the need for speech therapy services was immense, with an estimated 16 million adults and children having communication and swallowing problems. Twenty health professionals from HCMC who were already providing speech therapy services to clients had enrolled in the course which offered lectures by volunteer speech pathologists from Australia who were recognised as experts in the fields of voice, cleft lip and palate, and head and neck cancer. Clinical observation and opportunities to learn and practice selected clinical assessment and management techniques were also provided by volunteer clinicians from Australia, including myself. It was an amazing initiative to be part of.

Following the successful completion of the Short Course in October 2009, one thing quickly followed another, with a few diversions and set-backs along the way, but in early April 2010, TFA, Australian Volunteers International (AVI), Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine (PNTU) and the ENT Hospital of HCMC signed a Memorandum of Understanding to commence the first ever University-based Speech Therapy Training program in Vietnam. AVI, an arm of AusAID, agreed to financially and logistically support a two-year Course Coordinator in a volunteer position at PNTU. Whilst it would be fair to say I was daunted by the thought of spending two years away from Australia, I felt I could not pass up the opportunity to be involved. So, my application went in and eight weeks later, I was packing my bags for HCMC.



Students learning



I arrived in HCMC on May 28th, six weeks before the scheduled opening of the course. During this six-week period, I found a place to live, started to get accustomed to my surrounds, and enrolled in language classes. My priority was to meet and start the process of building relationships with not only the Vietnamese family I was living with, but also with the people I would be working with over the next two years. Also there was (and continues to be) a mountain of work to be done – all stimulating, challenging and, yes, at times stressful!

With the support and hard work of many people, the Speech Therapy Training Program opened at PNTU on the 6th September, 2010 with 19 extremely enthusiastic and motivated health professionals enrolled. All 19 students had been practising speech therapy in their workplaces for some time whilst still continuing in their primary rolls of doctors, nurses or physiotherapists. Mr. Graeme Swift, Australian Consul General to Vietnam, attended the opening as a representative of the Australian Government and its people, and continues to be a big support for the Program.

build its capacity to not only be able to provide lectures in all subjects relevant to the profession of speech therapy, but also to assume independence in the running of the Speech Therapy Training Course. It will only be through this independence that the Program will be sustainable in the long run.



Students work with client 'Bin' on 'concept'



Gaining valuable clinical experience

The structure of the Speech Therapy Program is unique. It has been designed to run over a two-year period and is divided into eight terms of three months each. To ensure the students are able to continue in their jobs, they alternate between attending three months full time at PNTU for lectures, then return to their workplaces to continue in their current jobs and implement what they have learned under the clinical supervision of Australian speech pathologists. Subjects such as 'Anatomy and Physiology', 'Linguistics' and 'Normal Speech and Language Development in Vietnamese Children' are taught by local lecturers who are experts in these subjects. For those subjects where there are currently no local experts, such as 'Voice', 'Dysphagia', 'CDNO' and 'Speech and Language Disorders of Children', volunteer lecturers from Australia provide these lectures. This is the same in relation to the clinical education component of the course – speech pathologists from Australia volunteer their time and expertise to assist in the development of the students' skills. It is indeed fair to say that without the ongoing support of the volunteer lecturers and clinicians, the program could not continue. However, the long-term objective (i.e. over the next 10 –15 years) is to assist PNTU to gradually

My Observations to date – a very brief synopsis

They say that "relationships are everything", and in Vietnam I have found this certainly to be the case! Whether it's getting to know the family with whom I share a house, or the xai om (motorbike taxi driver) who takes me to and from work each day, or my Manager at PNTU, or the speech therapy students, it's very clear - unless time is taken to get to know a person, to try and understand their perspective, to try and see the bigger picture as they see it, then all the best laid plans will never come to fruition. Because this is what is important in Vietnam – who you are and where you come from (figuratively speaking) and where you fit in to the bigger picture. I'm being totally honest when I say, that for me, from a Western country with a very different way of doing things, at times the "getting to know you" thing can be a little overwhelming, particularly when there are (my) deadlines to be met. So I am learning to "take time", to acknowledge and then let go of my assumptions, to not be driven by deadlines, outcomes, decisions that have to be set in concrete....for these are not the priority in Vietnam. And Surprise! Surprise! I'm finding I like Vietnam all the more. It is a fabulous country, whose people are warm, engaging and extremely welcoming and I feel privileged to be living and working alongside them. They are also extremely hard working and motivated, and it is because of these characteristics that I feel the profession of speech therapy will continue to develop long after the Speech Therapy Training Program has finished and it is in the hands of the Vietnamese people. I look forward to being in contact with you again as the Program further unfolds.

If you would like further information about the Speech Therapy Training Course at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine and/or are interested in volunteering your time and skills, please visit the Trinh Foundation Australia website at <http://trinhfoundation.org>

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