

Working in Developing Communities: Perspectives from a Private Practitioner

Why did you become involved in working in Developing Communities?

My interest in service delivery to areas in need was shaped from the start of my career, working in far west NSW and in particular, in Aboriginal communities. Once my four children left school, I felt like the "cage door" had finally been left open and that I was able to start to look for opportunities to fulfill one of my career ambitions; to work in developing communities using my skills acquired over 34 years of practice.

How did you get into this field of work?

Local orthodontist Dr Aziz Sahu-Khan, travelled regularly to Vietnam as part of a cleft palate team. Both my husband Peter, who is an orthodontist, and I were keen to join the team as self funded volunteers. It provided us with an opportunity for us to work together as well as share our professional expertise.

Do you feel there is a need for this type of work?

I believe we have a responsibility not only in Australia but also particularly with our Asia Pacific neighbours, to use our knowledge to help them manage the huge numbers of their population who have diminished quality of life because of communication and swallowing disorders.

What are some of the positive aspects associated with this field of work?

A little input can make a significant impact on quality of life. It is professionally stimulating constantly having to think "outside the square" in order to be effective given numerous economic, language and cultural constraints. The cross-cultural friendships that are forged when working towards a common goal is an additional reward. Much of what I have had to learn and do in working in Vietnam is directly applicable to the skills I need to practise in Australia.

What are some of the challenges associated with this field of work?

In Vietnam, there are bureaucratic obstacles and huge cultural differences as well as the obvious language barrier. Therapy methods and teaching have to constantly be re-evaluated in an attempt to balance our traditional western medicine approach and values against that of a different cultural and spiritual orientation. There are physical challenges, as well as the challenge of seeing many people in dire circumstances that you are not going to be able to change.

How do you fit your overseas development work into your normal life in Australia?

We established Trinh Foundation Australia (TFA) as a direct response to the major lack of knowledge about communication and swallowing disorders in Vietnam. Much of this work is driven from my home in Holgate, NSW, and takes the form of fund raising, submission writing, preparation of resources and planning. Like many private practitioners, I have been used to juggling my private practice around the needs of the family, so I manage to accommodate the day to day needs of TFA work. It is extremely satisfying to work with others both here and in Vietnam towards our shared goal of establishing speech therapy as a profession in Vietnam. As the visits to Vietnam (of two weeks duration) are timetabled well ahead of time, the impact on my caseload is minimised.



Trinh receives speech therapy from a nurse under the guidance of Sue Woodward, at the Odonto Maxillofacial Hospital HCM City

What advice would you give to someone interested in working in a developing community?

It is important to draw on the experience of others and to share with others who have worked in similar

settings. Good research and briefings before departure are essential to help in understanding the culture in which you will be working, and to prepare for the many unexpected things that arise. Someone interested in this type of work should attach themselves to a "larger group", such as the Working with Developing Communities Member Network of SPA or volunteer organisation such as Australian Volunteers International (AVI) or Australian Youth Ambassadors for development (AYAD). They should research work undertaken by non government organisations (NGO's) such as the Trinh Foundation in Vietnam to ascertain developments in a particular country and/or area of interest and clinical and other volunteer initiatives as they arise. It is important to have access to both in-country support, as well as other support systems for advice, debriefing etc.

How can those who are interested support the work of TFA?

TFA is currently assisting in the establishment of the first ever full time speech therapy university program in Vietnam. This will be a Post Graduate Diploma scheduled to commence in Ho Chi Minh City in September 2010.

As well as asking for expressions of interest from those who might like to help provide clinical training on a short term basis, TFA requires funds to support the course. Recently we have launched a "Treatment Session for Trinh" Campaign. For further details about this, and other work of the Foundation, please see our website: www.trinhfoundation.org.

Interview with **Sue Woodward**
*Speech Pathologist Private Practice,
Central Coast NSW
Conjoint Lecturer, University of
Newcastle,
Consultant Speech Pathologist,
Project Boomerang, Vietnam
Director, Trinh Foundation Australia
Ltd (TFA)*

NSW Branch Editor

Karen Atkinson
02 9872 0748
karen.atkinson@ridbc.org.au