

## REVISITING SRI LANKA -- TSUNAMI RELIEF 2006

### WORLD MEDICINE



**I**n September 23rd 2006 Bill Deng and I set out from KLIA for Sri Lanka to meet our World Medicine team. We had been preparing for some months, fundraising for our help and sponsorship of Pacific Spa Academy in KL. This culminated in me doing live acup and a noisy night doing acupuncture and massage mini -treatments with an increasingly ill Frangipani bar!

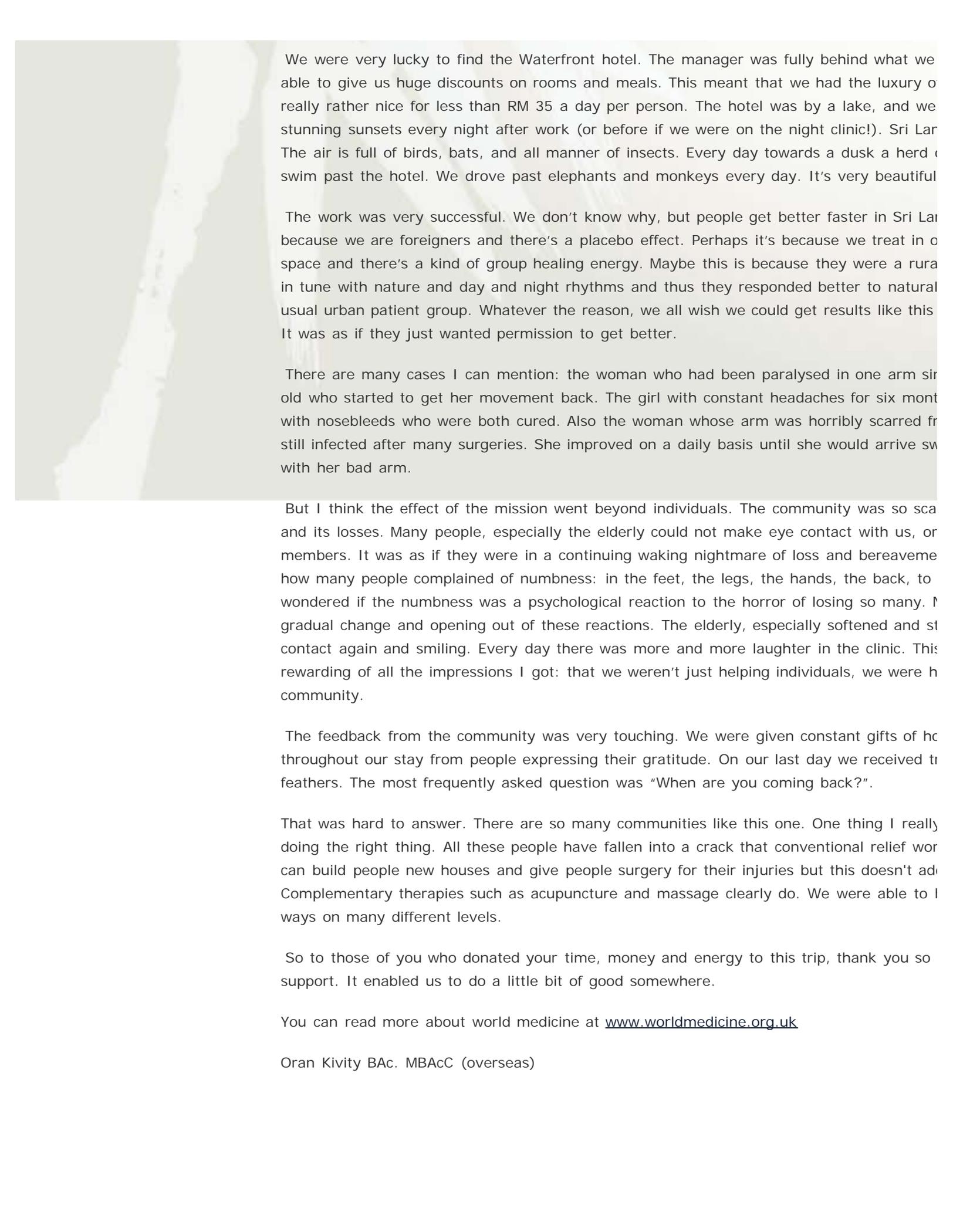
Our plans were thrown into confusion when we received news that the area we had arranged to visit on the east coast had become too dangerous. Eleven Muslims had been shot dead and the area was inaccessible. After a few calls we were invited to revisit Kirinda, an area in the south unaffected by the conflict. The World Medicine team had gone last May. This village had suffered terrible damage and losses in 2004 but had been rebuilt on higher ground by a Dutch charity.

It was a ten hour drive from Negombo where we stayed on the first night to Kirinda. We had to liaise with the local temple, to find accommodation, a venue from which to work, transport, and meals at the venue and let the local community know we would be there. A tall order to say the least but we managed!

A week later, after a blessing from the local Bantei, the chief incumbent of the local Buddhist temple, Sutilpawa and a powerful man with jurisdiction over fourteen monasteries in the area, we were nine of us, four who had been before and five new practitioners. Bill practised his needles and also performed the role of treasurer and administrator for the small group. He performed well and it was due to his good management that we were able to keep to our budget throughout.

We treated in a community centre. 30 chairs in a circle and 8 beds around the sides for cases. At first things were slow, which to the veterans of previous trips was frustrating but it was a welcome slow start which helped them acclimatise to the informal and uncomfortable setting (it's not easy to bend over a chair or a bed all day!). It also meant that we had the "luxury of a back tomorrow" to people who needed to. On previous trips we had been so busy so fast that we could not repeat treatments.

It was Ramadan and the 20% of the population who were Muslim were unable to come to our clinic for 'world medicine'. This does not seem to be a problem in Malaysia but in Kirinda it seems that they do not want to have needles penetrate the skin during the fasting hours. Nevertheless we were able to communicate with the Muslim community and ask them if they would come to a night clinic. This idea was enthusiastically received and meant splitting our little group of nine practitioners into two shifts: one morning and evening and one afternoon. But the idea worked. By the third evening clinic we were already totalling 100 treatments. A strange coincidence it turned out that the Muslim community in Kirinda were descended from a mix of Dutch and Indonesian. This meant that they also spoke a kind of Bahasa and made communication much easier with World Medicine practitioners who is half Dutch and half Indonesian.



We were very lucky to find the Waterfront hotel. The manager was fully behind what we were able to give us huge discounts on rooms and meals. This meant that we had the luxury of a really rather nice for less than RM 35 a day per person. The hotel was by a lake, and we had stunning sunsets every night after work (or before if we were on the night clinic!). Sri Lanka. The air is full of birds, bats, and all manner of insects. Every day towards a dusk a herd of elephants would swim past the hotel. We drove past elephants and monkeys every day. It's very beautiful.

The work was very successful. We don't know why, but people get better faster in Sri Lanka because we are foreigners and there's a placebo effect. Perhaps it's because we treat in a different space and there's a kind of group healing energy. Maybe this is because they were a rural community in tune with nature and day and night rhythms and thus they responded better to natural healing than the usual urban patient group. Whatever the reason, we all wish we could get results like this. It was as if they just wanted permission to get better.

There are many cases I can mention: the woman who had been paralysed in one arm since birth, an old man who started to get her movement back. The girl with constant headaches for six months, a man with nosebleeds who were both cured. Also the woman whose arm was horribly scarred from a snake bite, still infected after many surgeries. She improved on a daily basis until she would arrive smiling with her bad arm.

But I think the effect of the mission went beyond individuals. The community was so suffering from loss and its losses. Many people, especially the elderly could not make eye contact with us, or with other community members. It was as if they were in a continuing waking nightmare of loss and bereavement. How many people complained of numbness: in the feet, the legs, the hands, the back, to the face. I wondered if the numbness was a psychological reaction to the horror of losing so many. I saw a gradual change and opening out of these reactions. The elderly, especially softened and started making eye contact again and smiling. Every day there was more and more laughter in the clinic. This was a rewarding of all the impressions I got: that we weren't just helping individuals, we were helping a community.

The feedback from the community was very touching. We were given constant gifts of hospitality throughout our stay from people expressing their gratitude. On our last day we received thousands of feathers. The most frequently asked question was "When are you coming back?".

That was hard to answer. There are so many communities like this one. One thing I really enjoyed doing the right thing. All these people have fallen into a crack that conventional relief work can't fill. We can build people new houses and give people surgery for their injuries but this doesn't address the root of the problem. Complementary therapies such as acupuncture and massage clearly do. We were able to help in many ways on many different levels.

So to those of you who donated your time, money and energy to this trip, thank you so much for your support. It enabled us to do a little bit of good somewhere.

You can read more about world medicine at [www.worldmedicine.org.uk](http://www.worldmedicine.org.uk)

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