

ACUPUNCTURE SANS FRONTIERES

THE TSUNAMI RELIEF PROJECT

Hello all,

I'm just back from two weeks volunteer work with Acupuncture sans Frontières in Sri Lanka. Many thanks for your donations, pledges, support and advice for the tsunami relief project.

You'll be pleased to hear that I had an amazing time. It was probably the most fulfilling work I have ever done. More importantly, it was clear that the team made a huge difference to the people we treated. Every returning patient seemed to get big improvements even in chronic conditions, and it was clear that they were very appreciative.

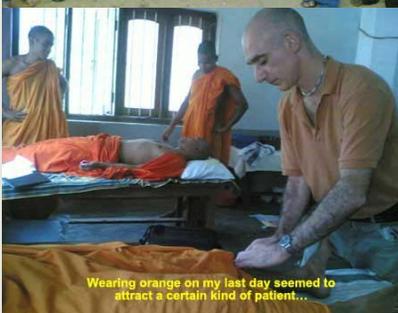
In my group I was one of the two practitioners with experience in treating children, so I spent a lot of time with under 10's, doing the gentlest Japanese acupuncture techniques I could think of, and teaching the parents how to do daily massage. Some cases were very sad: we saw an infant with liver cancer on my last day. We weren't able to do much, but we did baby-sit the wee thing while his mother got some much needed treatment for her stress and depression.

Some teenagers responded very quickly to treatment and felt changes as soon as they got off the table. One 20 year old boy was blind and had had terrible headaches and dizziness daily since he was 4. The headache stopped during his first treatment and didn't come back during the two weeks I was there.

Most of the people we treated were older though. The two main age groups were 40-60 and 60+, and the vast majority of the conditions we treated were musculo-skeletal. Not surprising, as the south, where the tsunami hit, is tea farming land. I must say I will never look at a cup of Ceylon tea in quite the same way again, now that I know how much human toil and suffering goes into it. We treated endless rows of people with bad backs, numbness in the feet, the hands, swollen knees, sciatic pain: It was really an eye opener into what a life of hard labour in the sun can do to you.

Nevertheless, even with such deep-set and chronic conditions some people experienced great relief, even after one session. One patient's changes seemed so miraculous that at one point I thought she was just trying to please us, and I asked the translator if she was joking. Her numbness had gone, her pain had gone, her limp was gone. Apparently she was really telling us how she felt.

I put this down, in part, to our old friend placebo. It's hard to underestimate the 'magical' quality of seeing a group of Western 'doctors' in white coats working hard with their hands and hearts to help a group



of farmers. As the chief incumbent of one monastery said, just the sight alone would make some people feel better. I say, if placebo works, use it. A cure is a cure, however it came about.

There were 24 of us in the team. Three masseurs who'd opted in, and 21 acupuncturists. I had been in practice the longest, and although not quite the oldest, I was a kind of senior statesman in the team, there to focus the youthful idealism of the others and use my experience to help the thing move along.

Sri Lankans are really charming. They have the same gentle way of smiling that the Thai have, and are stoic in the extreme. There was no point asking them psychological type questions like 'do your headaches come when you're upset' because the answer would always be 'no, I'm fine'. Even palpating acupuncture points and asking if they felt tender would get the answer 'no'. Eventually I stopped asking 'does this hurt', and started asking 'does this feel different?' or 'does this hurt a little bit?' They could admit to a little bit!

All of this through interpreters who weren't always very good. I treated one girl for 'neck pain' one day, and 'sore throat' the next (different interpreter). I learnt that 'phlegm problem', 'wheeze', 'catarrh' and 'cough' all meant (probably) asthma, which seemed a huge problem.

And the tsunami? I got a short tour of the new housing project. New houses going up on the graves of the old. I could still see the concrete outlines on the ground of houses that were destroyed by the wave. All the rubble had gone, just the shade of where the house had been in the ground. The temple itself had suffered extensive damage.

There is a lot of new construction going on there. The hotels have reinvented themselves and the tourist board has set high targets to attract new business to the island. I'd love to go there again as a tourist, and I certainly would go there again as a volunteer.

Finally, I realised something else about this kind of charity work. This kind of giving feels to me what healing should be about. We were not distracted by any sense of transaction: no bills to pay, no charges to levy. It was just giving, out of a sense of human kindness or community, and in that giving we received something very special, a sense of worth and purpose that I for one, had never before experienced.

Thanks for helping me to get there and making it happen, from them, and from me.

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Kuala Lumpur

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