

# An enriching experience



The group in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka

## Ruth Gwynn-Thomas reflects on a World Federation of Occupational Therapists visit to Sri Lanka

In January this year, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) and Jon Baines Tours organised and led a trip to Sri Lanka, which included visits to hospitals, clinics and day centres across the island, in addition to a number of cultural experiences.

The final enrolled group was made up of three occupational therapists and a retired GP from the UK, two occupational therapists from Australia and the president of WFOT.

Ruth Gwynn-Thomas was one of the OTs from the UK: 'With a diverse skill set including mental health, paediatrics, university lecturer and community rehabilitation, we all complimented each other's enthusiasm for worldwide occupational therapy,' she says.

'Throughout the two weeks we spent travelling around Sri Lanka, professional relations and firm friendships were forged. At each hospital, clinic or centre that we visited we were privileged to be given a full tour of each [facility] and both formal and informal discussions around occupational therapy practices and future developments proved interesting and thought provoking.

'A discussion with the hospital directors to promote the occupational therapy service within each establishment was also incorporated into all visits. All the Sri Lankan OTs we met proved to be calm and competent with their assessments and treatment plans.'

She adds: 'Here in the UK, we have developed areas of specialism with staffing levels allowing a range of expertise for junior occupational therapists to continue learning from more senior members of staff, whereas in Sri Lanka the emphasis is on the occupational therapists demonstrating their skills to manage a generalised case load.

'This is partly due to the profession still being relatively new within the country and therefore numbers still very low. Each occupational therapy graduate is often working single handed within a main general hospital.'

At present Sri Lanka has 120 occupational therapists, with a further 63 students currently being educated.

'The expectation is high for them to deliver a wide range

of treatment programmes for patients including paediatrics, rheumatology, splinting, trauma and orthopaedics, and even mental health, all covered under one roof and working from one department,' Ruth explains.

'A department in one of the general hospitals we visited consisted of a room no bigger than eight foot by ten foot with a green curtain as the door. The OT we met showed a superb example of applying the occupational therapy principles to any condition, then developing and carrying out the treatment programme.

'Her evidence showed that four out five patients made enough progress to be discharged with full independence.'

The group visited a rehabilitation hospital in Galle that provided occupational therapy for trauma patients, mainly suffering from spinal cord injuries resulting from road traffic incidents on motorbikes, or falling from trees.

'Each patient was seen for therapy twice a day, [but even with] limited resources and minimal staff the occupational therapists and physiotherapists proved that high standards of care and treatment could still be maintained,' she goes on.

'In conclusion, Sri Lanka has a relatively new occupational therapy cohort and having gained island-wide recognition for the diploma and subsequently the degree their entry numbers are growing year on year.

'WFOT is proactively supporting this growth across Sri Lanka. I have been enthused by my travels to share my reflections on a professionally enriching experience and felt privileged to have met such engaging and enthusiastic occupational therapists in Sri Lanka, and not forgetting to thank my fellow travellers for continuing to remind me why I love occupational therapy and still enjoy my chosen career after 25 years.

'I now have a better understanding of the role and value of WFOT and look forward to working with their members again in the future.'

**Ruth Gwynn-Thomas**, occupational Therapist. To become an individual member of WFOT visit: [www.cot.co.uk/join-wfot/join-wfot](http://www.cot.co.uk/join-wfot/join-wfot)