

Rose-AMDA Canada children's post-tsunami therapy "Recovery, Optimism, Support, Experience"



Introduction

No caption is needed for the picture above. Everything is written in the face of this little boy whose whole world, as he knew it, was overturned utterly in the space of a few seconds. The photograph was taken around 3 weeks after the disaster and yet it is with him as though it were only an hour ago. It is an observation of the writer that children in Sri Lanka almost universally, look at own image taken with a digital camera with delight and excitement. It was this which was the motive for the taking of this photograph... yet there was not the slightest change in this little boys expression when it was shown to him..just the same haunted hollowness.

The Rose-AMDA Canada arrived in Kalmunai, east coast of Sri Lanka on the 9th and had established paediatric services within the main hospital, clinic and displaced persons camps within a week. Seeing over 100 children per day in the clinics it became rapidly clear that many wore the blank haunted appearances of the child above. More often than not the child would be accompanied by a grandparent, or aunt or uncle as her/his parent(s) had been killed. Other children, wearing happier expressions had also suffered losses of friends, family, homes, etc.

Communication back to HQ in Vancouver allowed rapid research, consultation with child post traumatic stress (PTS) experts and the mobilization of resources to add a component of PTS therapy into the medical project. The program was launched in the field on 29th January 2005 with a play therapy session held in the tsunami memorial children's clinic of Kalmunai base hospital. For 10 days prior to this several local works had been trained by a trainer from the NGO 'Operation USA' who had been working in

the region and kindly volunteered to conduct a training session at the AMDA-Canada office.

The session gave results which were both astounding and horrifying. The children were given crayons and paper. They were not told to draw anything in particular with them, but 80% of them drew tsunami related pictures. The scenes vividly depicted houses covered in water, drowning people, trees being knocked down with or without trying to hang onto them, people running away, lying (presumably dead) on the ground. Birds circle overhead (probably fishing from the disrupted waters) and in many, water covers everything.



Some children would no sooner finish one drawing than they would start another almost identical to the first. This would continue for painting after painting.

When the children had entered the playgroup, only one or two had demonstrated the obvious classic 'tsunami stress' affect of the little boy above. Yet despite this, so many of the children drew tsunami pictures that it rapidly became apparent that despite their reasonably happy external appearance there was, terrible underlying stress. This was coming out through the drawing.

Clearly there was need for considerable expansion of the project.

Some images from this first session are shown below.





Project progress and plans.

Recovery- Optimism- Support- Experience

Dr. Yaya de Andrade, an expert in the field of child post traumatic stress is now directing the project. At the time of writing (March 05) she is in Kalmunai directing personally and planning out the program in detail. She has pointed out in recent correspondence that Recovery, Optimism, Support and Experience are *“4 pillars of a rehab program where children benefit”*

The number of groups being held has now increased to three per week. These are not only now held in the Children’s clinic but also (arranged by Antony Richard) out in the displaced persons camps themselves. Again and again the same results as with the initial group are found. Sometimes, on the second or third groups the pictures being drawn have changed in content to happier themes than the tsunami. In some of these groups, cultural pillars are also employed of participatory local dancing and music sessions.

Plans are to continue and expand this work (funding permitting). A longer term plan is to cooperate in the construction of a family community center, to be positioned adjacent to the town of Kalmunai in an inland direction, away from the ocean. The ocean is now seen as a place of destruction to be feared and avoided. The community center will be a safe haven where children and families can come and feel secure. Rose AMDA will provide continued therapy group organization there.



View from proposed site of community center. Well away from the sea, but overlooking calm wetlands

Summary

The AMDA-Canada post tsunami project identified the need for child post traumatic stress support through its own direct hands on experience in its medical project. Prior to this, while it had been noted that it had been discussed by many groups it had not been anticipated that this would be part of the overall project. The obvious need however made it imperative that appropriate assistance was organized quickly and Rose AMDA was fortunate that Vancouver has an excellent pool of experts from which to draw, and all of whom were and are generous in the volunteering of their knowledge and experience.

A project has thus been commenced which is addressing a very great need in an area of turmoil, again a result of the terrible tsunami experience. We hope and believe that it will assist many of the little people of tsunami affected Sri Lanka to fulfill balanced, happy and loving lives in the future and help them eventually to dispel unwind the grief of their losses, and terror of their experiences.

The directors of Rose-AMDA Canada are, once again hugely grateful to the donors of B.C, Canada, and other parts of the world for making this possible.