

0398

Being an Initiator: Outcomes of a Voluntary Occupational Therapy Intervention in West Bengal, India.

Gillian Hurley

Private Practice, Perth Western Australia, Australia

Introduction: Children born into poverty with a disability in West Bengal are more likely to be abandoned by families and at risk of homelessness and abuse. They are more likely to be denied the basic right to be supported to maximise their potential for physical, mental and social development and participation in education and employment. **Objectives:** To share a very personal journey of one Occupational Therapist, born in Chile and living in Western Australia, who recognised an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the lives of a marginalised community in West Bengal, India.

Description: Through case studies and personal narratives, this paper describes the outcomes of six years of service and the challenges inherent in addressing cultural, geographical and financial barriers to maximise social inclusion and participation for children with disabilities living at Anandaniketan - Society for Mental Health Care. Anandaniketan is an Indian not-for-profit organisation that provides shelter for abandoned children. It depends on charitable donations and international volunteers with Equal Health, a Western Australian based aid organisation, and undergraduate students to provide habilitation and rehabilitation programmes. This presentation demonstrates the importance of one practitioner's commitment to act tenaciously in support of, and sustain long-term involvement with, a community in need in rural India. **Results:** The unique contribution of occupational therapy within a multi-disciplinary approach is evidenced in the development of a culture of healthy occupation through an on-going programme involving specialist volunteers and undergraduate students to enhance developmental needs of the community and demonstrates the importance of collaboration between individuals with social conscience, local organisations such as Anandaniketan, aid organisations and educational institutions, which is paramount to the ongoing growth of this project. **Conclusion:** Occupational therapists have a unique combination of skills to support children around the world, especially those born into poverty with a disability, to maximise their potential and participate in education and employment. **Contribution to occupational therapy practice:** Volunteer work is one highly rewarding way for occupational therapists to support children in need around the world.