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An Occupational Therapist's account of working in a Transylvanian Psychiatric Hospital, Romania

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Introduction: Seven months of voluntary work in a Romanian psychiatric institution, opened my eyes to a new world. Past political regimes and a lack of universal trade had left this country, along with its health facilities, very much as the poor cousin of Western Europe. Health services were not client-led, staff training was limited, and public perception of 'mental health' was limited. The ever expanding arm of the human rights act was beginning to touch the Government agenda on health, but was yet to fully influence hospital protocols.

Objectives: The Objective of the volunteer role was to offer the hospital residents a secure and safe environment, with opportunities for therapeutic outlets for one hour a week. We could use any appropriate forms of creative activity, with either locally purchased or internationally donated resources that would not conflict with any of the hospital policies or procedures.

Description: Using a number of different mediums which included, graded creative activity, music and singing, drama, socially interactive game playing, and reality orientation techniques, patients were offered a wide range of activities to encourage new skill development, and identify existing patient skills. Environmental influences on patient self image, role deprivation and meaningful activity were identified and addressed, using culturally appropriate social activities. These activities empowered the patients to be the 'teachers' to the volunteers, and encouraged patients to identify and engage in activity of their own volition.

Discussion: Did the current lack of any caring role, a role which is at the heart of the Romanian and Hungarian society, have a detrimental effect on the patient's self image? To what level could one hour of 'intervention' each week, have on the quality of life of the hospital patients?

Conclusion: Working in a new culture, with a different value system and with conflicting political influences allows therapists to reconsider the importance of how the physical and social environment can affect an individual's behaviour, cognition, volition and self image.

Contribution to OT practice: Exposure to international mental health practices develop OT's understanding of cultural influence, and OT skills can be shared with promoted within other countries.