



Acupuncture Sans Frontières - Sri Lanka

MICHAEL ARNOLD

Member

Acupuncture sans Frontières was set up after the tsunami to provide aid to the people whose lives had been dramatically upturned by the disaster. Last year they sent a group of 22 acupuncturists as well as two massage therapists, a homeopath and several herbal practitioners to Sri Lanka. They treated over 2000 people during their three week trip, 77 per cent of whom said they experienced a positive benefit from the treatment. People came with a wide range of conditions including musculo-skeletal and gastrointestinal complaints, headaches and back pain, but the majority were suffering from the emotional trauma of the tsunami, many having lost their families and homes.

When I heard that Acupuncture sans Frontières were organising another trip to Sri Lanka I jumped at the chance to help the Sri Lankan people in such a direct way. This trip was headed for the more remote east coast of the island, where least aid has reached, and where the destruction was greatest.

Myself, 11 other acupuncturists, a massage therapist, and a healer set out for Sri Lanka on 24 April. We arrived at our destination late on the next day after a beautiful drive through the hill country. After a day of rest and recovery we began to set up the two clinics we would be working from during our three week stay. Both were situated in the coastal town of Kirinda. One was to be in the Buddhist monastery and the other in a Dutch aid agency housing project built for people who had lost their homes in the tsunami.

Posters had been put up around the town the week before our arrival to let people know about the clinic, but we arrived at the monastery on the first morning not really knowing how many people would turn up. We set up the first clinic in a school classroom next to the monastery and by lunchtime there were about 30 people gathered outside. When we opened the clinic at 2pm this number had

grown to about 50 and people were still arriving. Half of the group then set off to set up the other clinic while myself, five other acupuncturists and the massage therapist started treating. Practice was necessarily very different to what we were used to. For a start, we didn't have the luxury of separate rooms for each practitioner and the makeshift couches were school tables and benches draped with cloth.

Our first problem was sharing the two translators between the seven of us.

Very few people



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spoke English and we needed to carry out some form of diagnosis. This too had to be adapted to finding out the bare essentials before allowing the translator to move onto the next patient. We were

aware of the increasing crowd outside and didn't want to keep people waiting too long in the now intense heat. People came with all manner of conditions but we soon started to find that there were several common problems like backache, knee pain and sciatica. Many people are farmers and manual labourers and the excessive strain on the body soon became clear. Many had conditions related to poor diet, such as enlarged thyroid glands due to iodine deficiency. At times it seemed frustrating. How much could we really do under such conditions? But then there were other moments, like at the end of many treatments, when we saw the ease and calm begin to show on stressed and anxious faces. On several occasions people got up and bowed to us at the end of a treatment, beaming big smiles and thanking us profusely.

As news of our arrival spread, the numbers of people waiting for treatment each morning grew. By the end we were

seeing over 200 patients between us each day. Despite

limited time with each patient we saw some amazing results. For example I treated a woman who had been suffering from recurrent headaches for 10 years. I gave her a simple treatment and when she

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came back the following week I asked her how she was. She reported in a very matter of fact way that the headaches had gone, and could I now do something for her knees. This kind of dramatic response was in fact not uncommon, judging by similar stories from other practitioners. It seems that our strong desire to give something of lasting benefit, combined with our patients' receptiveness and need, created a very powerful energy.

I returned from the trip extremely humbled by the immense warmth and openness of the Sri Lankan people. I also brought back a sense of the enormous power of acupuncture to bring relief and hope to people's lives. If it can do so much under such extreme circumstances surely we need not fear how much we can give to our patients back home. I now find myself questioning the value of my treatments much less. By necessity we learned to drop all questions of 'How much are we really giving these people?' and instead focused our energy on the unique person in front of us. I now see that we are often our own biggest obstacle.

Experiencing Sri Lanka

SABRINA AZIM
Member

The hospitality, grace and acceptance of the Sri Lankans were what made this expedition worthwhile. Even though the villagers of this remote part of Sri Lanka were the most affected and the poorest, they all appeared satisfied and grateful with their

lives. I had never been treated with so much respect; it truly was an honour. To this day I am amazed at the effects the treatments had on these people. This expedition was not only a relief mission for the Sri Lankans but also a professional and personal development programme and I am grateful to have been part of a wonderful team.

I had never imagined that I could cure double vision with just one treatment, a very basic one at that, including only yintang and taiyang. Contrary to being addressed as 'Doctors' by the locals, our treatments were far from orthodox medicine. However, I will never forget the shocking presentation of a 14 year-old boy with second degree burns on both of his feet. It was a battle trying to get him to see a medical doctor. One of the burns had become so badly infected I was convinced the foot would need to be amputated. Out of my own personal need to help this boy, I treated him using Lu 7, Kid 6, Ren 6 and St 36. Immediately after the treatment he told me he felt an anaesthetic effect in both feet.

Many people presented with common arthritic pain and general arthralgia. As a TCM practitioner I was able to treat these conditions with ease using common local points. The advantage of having a diverse range of disciplines was that we each had a speciality. I often observed five element practitioners perform miraculous treatments on deep rooted emotional problems. This was ultimately a great opportunity to share tips and knowledge about various protocols.

Judging by the attitude of Sri Lankans towards acupuncture, I am certain that AsF will be successful in other parts of the world. I look forward to the next visit to Pakistan next year.

There is also another trip going to Sri Lanka this September. To find out more about either of these trips please contact Daniel Maxwell on info@danielmaxwell.co.uk or 07946 390212.



Children celebrating the Buddha's birthday recognise us, some having visited the clinic.
Photo: Stephen Hunter