

An Australian Occupational Therapist Reflects on her work in Transylvania, Romania

My name is Emma Hutchinson. I am currently working for 5 months as a volunteer occupational therapist in Zalău, a regional city in Transylvania, Romania.



Zalău main street

Oxen pulling cart



Strip farming near Breb



I am working part time in the neurology ward of Salaj District Hospital and part time with a Dutch Foundation called ACASA, which provides nursing and rehabilitation to people in their homes. Occupational therapy, as we would know it in Australia is a profession that does not yet exist in Romania. Therefore, a large amount of my time is spent educating doctors about the benefits of such therapy and training nurses and other health professionals in techniques, particularly relevant to the area of neurology, so that the work can continue once I have left Romania. It is unlikely a health professional such as an occupational therapist or physiotherapist will be employed at this hospital in the near future because of the lack of funding available to support such a position.



Emma Hutchinson (left)



Feresti children (right)

In the hospital, patients who have suffered a stroke (in fact any kind of condition) do not normally receive any form of treatment or therapy to encourage functional return of the affected body parts. My work both in the hospital and with ACASA is primarily with people who have suffered neurological conditions. The aim of the therapy is to minimise further deconditioning, caused by lack of movement and, and to maintain or even improve the patient's function, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

The patients, with the support of their family members are generally very keen and motivated to get better. They are receptive to the therapy and it is such a joy to see them proud of their achievements and improvements. However due to lack of resources there is little education given by doctors about the medical condition and little encouragement from nurses to conduct exercises. Therefore, with the help of 2nd year occupational therapy students from the University of South Australia, I am developing some posters and information sheets that patients and family members can refer to, to provide them with a greater understanding of what has happened to them medically and physiologically, and what they can do in terms of exercises and other activities to improve their condition.

There have been many challenging occasions here in Romania when I have been grateful for the skills I have developed in occupational therapy. Not only skills used in therapeutic techniques,

but also skills related to creativity and resourcefulness. The nurses and patients often laugh at the objects I pull out of my bag to use in therapy. Sponges, toothpicks, balloons, clothes pegs, water bottles, cups – every day objects are included in my bag of therapeutic tools!

A significant difference at the hospital compared to Australian conditions is the over-crowded wards and lack of curtains between beds. The lack of curtains does have some benefits, however, as it allows other patients and family members to watch the treatment. Sometimes I feel like I am leading an aerobics class, as other patients join in the exercises from where they are sitting or lying. On one occasion I was working with a patient to move her arm from the shoulder, which was something she was afraid to do, but was quite capable of. I decided to blow up a balloon and instructed her to use her hand to hit it back to me. Other people in the room were encouraging her in the activity and they joined in hitting the balloon around the room. It was like a game of 'keep the balloon off the ground' which can be quite an adventure when people are stuck in bed. It was so rewarding to see the patients getting up, moving about and enjoying themselves!!

It has been highlighted to me what a broad and diverse profession occupational therapy is and how the treatment methods can be adapted in so many ways to suit various situations, such as where there are limited resources and where language can be a barrier. In addition to my work in neurology in the hospital, I try to spend some time in paediatrics with babies who are admitted for long periods of time because of "social problems" (in other words, they have been abandoned.) Because there is usually nothing medically wrong with the babies, they are not always seen as the highest priority and therefore can be left in their cots for long periods of time without the opportunity to explore their environment or receive affection. Simply providing care and conducting simple exercises will hopefully make a big difference to these babies. Spending time with the babies also gives me some 'time out' from the challenges of neurology, especially as the babies don't mind if I can't speak Romanian!

Emma with Florin





The ACASA team

As I have travelled around parts of this beautiful country of Romania and have seen the poverty of resources, particularly in areas of health and disability, I am amazed at the number of situations I have encountered where occupational therapy would be of benefit. In the light of these things I am constantly reminded of the great potential this profession has in so many areas all over the world.

**Emma Hutchinson
November 2003**

NB: Emma will be returning to Australia on December 2003. She is currently registered with OTION.