

Working with Romania's Abandoned Children: What can be learnt?

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Background

Fifteen years since the end of Romania's brutal dictatorship, thousands of children are still in state-run institutions and children with disabilities are far more likely to be abandoned.

The Life Foundation (CIC No.6528575) is a small British organisation which arranges for volunteers from a range of specialties to work in institutions for children and adults with disabilities

We present our observations of the work that has been carried out, feedback from volunteers, and discuss the pros and cons to this type of practice.

"We were very wary of appearing paternalistic and that we knew everything."
- Physiotherapist

Discussion

Volunteers play an **important role** in providing social interaction and some volunteers were able to provide valuable training to the Romanian staff.

Some volunteers showed **cultural sensitivity** and gave recommendations to the most appropriate stakeholders. However some advice was repetitive and delivered to those who were not in a position to make changes. Some volunteers had **unrealistic aims**, this led to them being disappointed and risks worsening relationships with Romanian staff.

Crisp³ emphasises the importance of **country-led development**, which is an area for improvement because Romanian stakeholders were not often involved in discussions. Suchdev⁴ highlights the ethical imperative for **good supervision** of junior staff, some students were supported by seniors but some required much more supervision.

Recommendations

1. Continue to break the monotony of the children's lives and advocate for the children.
2. Prepare specialist volunteers more thoroughly, improve continuity and emphasise cultural sensitivity.
3. Set realistic expectations for specialist volunteers.
4. Improve relationships between volunteers and Romanian staff by ensuring that volunteers are making suitable recommendations to the most appropriate stakeholder.
5. Establish a clinical governance system and improve supervision of students and newly qualified volunteers.
6. Change focus from assessing individual children, to improving training of staff at all levels.

References 1. Pinheiro, P. *World Report on Violence against Children*. New York: UNICEF, 2006. 2. Csáky, C. *Keeping children out of harmful institutions: why we should be investing in family-based care*. Save the Children, 2009. 3. Crisp, N. *Global Health Partnerships*. COI, 2007. 4. Suchdev, P. et al. A model for sustainable short-term international medical trips. *Ambulatory Paediatrics*. 2007, (7) pp.317-320. Training photograph: Daniella Staub. Young girl photograph: Amy McCulloch



The volunteers provide training to the Romanian staff on a range of topics.

Globally 8 million children live in institutions.¹
80% have at least one living parent.²

Staffing

Country-led

Sharing

Evidence-Based

NHS Support

Health Systems & Technology

Crisp 2007³

Conclusion

The volunteers are important in breaking the monotony of the children's lives and advocating for them. Focussed and specific pre-trip preparation would help to improve cultural sensitivity, set realistic goals and improve continuity. This would allow a shift in emphasis from individual assessments and treatment plans, to improving the wider system. Better supervision of junior volunteers would encourage good work to continue in a safer manner.

Conflict of Interest:

CW is director of The Life Foundation.

A young girl, born with Tetralogy of Fallot, who was adopted recently thanks to fundraising by volunteers to cover the cost of much-needed heart surgery.

