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Out there

REPORTS FROM THE FRONTIERS OF ACUPUNCTURE

MEMBER OLGA FEDINA TALKS TO MEMBER SEAN CLEERE

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BACc member Sean Cleere spent over a year in the Mysore district of India, providing acupuncture treatments at the Odanadi centre for rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking.

OF: What does Odanadi mean?

SC: Odanadi means 'soul mate' in the local Kannada language.

OF: Tell us about the project, when and how it started, and what it does.

SC: Odanadi was established 17 years ago. It works for the rescue, rehabilitation and empowerment of the victims of human trafficking. Its founders, Stanly KV and Parshu Ram, started working life as journalists. After helping one sex worker, Radhamma, and her young son they became more and more involved in helping other victims, until the organisation ballooned into what it is today. Sadly Radhamma died of an Aids related illness but her son is now a lawyer.

These two men are the most humble and heroic human beings that I have ever met. They are right at the sharp end, actively going into brothels and taking women and children out. After this the main aim is reintegration, where possible, and as soon as possible. For the children that stay in the home there is evaluation followed by counselling and support. Then the emphasis is on education and empowerment. Most of the children are at school or college. It really is a home in the best sense of the word.

They also do a lot of outreach work; in many of the tribal areas people are extremely vulnerable to trafficking and

exploitation. Odanadi aims to shed light on their predicaments, make them aware of their rights and help them learn to support themselves. Odanadi does all this in the face of corruption at every level.

OF: How and when did you get involved?

SC: I was introduced to Odanadi about 18 months ago by a friend and was immediately struck by the importance of their work. I immediately offered to provide acupuncture.

OF: Who do you treat, people who work there or the residents?

SC: For the first six months I treated some members of staff. Acupuncture was very new to everybody there; it felt like a long interview. They are very protective of the children and I have a huge respect for that. At the end of the six months I was asked to treat one of the girls. Now we can have up to 30 children for treatment in one session.

OF: How do you find acupuncture helps them?

SC: From day one I believed that acupuncture would be a great benefit there. I think that the effects are many. There's the obvious relief of general symptoms such as pain, headaches, stomach problems, hormonal

imbalances, fevers, and the symptom relief for children with HIV. So many of these kids have incredibly traumatic histories and so, obviously, emotional and psychological disturbances are abundant. This is an area in which acupuncture has a huge effect.

Also because of the group treatments it creates quite an amazing space within the home. I think this benefits everyone, practitioners included.

OF: Do you find your way of treating is different at Odanadi as compared to England?

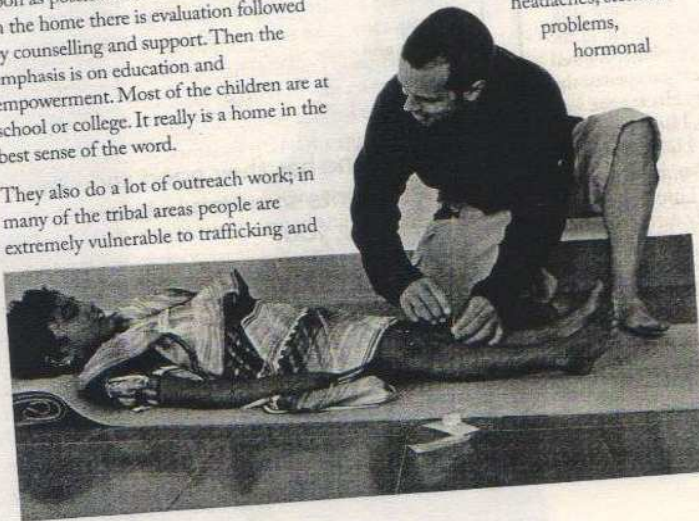
SC: It's very different. We realised early on that it was their home and that we were guests. I find that the most important factor is accessibility, in that it is a comfortable and safe experience for them on all levels: physical, cultural and intellectual. Also because of the girls' histories and the cultural differences we set strict parameters. Treatments are open-door and in groups; complete transparency is essential. It's a different kind of challenge which actually creates an incredible group dynamic. There is also a level of appropriateness in terms of accessing points; it's pretty much head, neck, lower arms and lower legs. We also have a special deal for newcomers, which is 'wundu suji anan' or 'one needle brother'. Pretty quickly they are demanding to have more needles.

OF: Do you charge for treatments, or do you work on an entirely voluntary basis?

SC: I work on a voluntary basis, like many people at Odanadi.

OF: I know you have participated in other World Medicine projects. Which ones?

SC: I was involved in four trips to Sri Lanka. It can seem like a drop in the ocean but I believe it's incredibly important that as a profession we engage in this kind of service work. I guarantee that on a personal level it will change the way people think about life as well as work.





OF: What is so special about Odanadi that makes you go back there and spend so much time there?

SC: It's very hard to summarise. I think that it's an incredibly important place in and of itself. But I also believe that if this kind of inhumanity can happen somewhere it can happen anywhere. So it's important that we all engage in our own way to whatever extent we can. It doesn't matter whether that's hands on, supporting the workers, or through donations or raising awareness. As long as we all look at it.

There are many incredibly harrowing stories at Odanadi, but actually more than this I am constantly humbled, inspired and energised by these amazing children and the few brave souls that protect them. I just feel incredibly privileged to spend time there. Aside from that we have managed to provide them with acupuncture, osteopathy, homocopathy, massage, taiji and qigong. I believe that these are all fantastic therapies for this kind of environment.

OF: Are you able to communicate with the residents?

SC: Communication becomes a very different thing in these situations. You really have to work with signs rather than symptoms in many cases. Then an incredible communication begins that is a strange mixture of languages, mimes and simple human understanding. Also, you have to allow them to open up when they are ready. It literally took months before any of them would tell me about

their 'monthlies', but we got there and that's the important part. So, yes, I would say that we can definitely communicate.

OF: Are you doing any other work at Odanadi apart from acupuncture?

SC: Mainly acupuncture, but I help in whatever way I can. I do my bit for fundraising and awareness. Also I try to introduce volunteers with different skills and help the new volunteers to get acclimatised.



OF: What was your happiest experience at that place? And if you don't mind sharing it, the saddest one?

SC: There are many of both; they always seem to go hand in hand. Ganga's story is typical. She was coerced from a bus stop by two older women who sold her to a brothel in Mumbai. There she initially refused to eat. Another woman comforted her and gently persuaded her that she needed to eat. The food was drugged. On waking she found that she had been brutally raped and so began that terrible part of her life. After two years she was rescued by Odanadi.

Unfortunately by this time she had contracted Aids and suffered internal injuries.

The single most powerful experience of my career also involved Ganga. After six months of treating the staff she was the first child that I was asked to work with. I was very nervous. A few days later the staff told me that Ganga would like some more treatment. They told me that it was great to see her smiling again after so many months. This was my happiest moment; for Ganga to have felt that benefit was wonderful. It also meant that the door was now open to provide an acupuncture service for more of them.

OF: How can the readers help this project?

SC: Information and donations are via www.odanadi-uk.org, the UK group that has recently been set up specifically to raise funds and awareness. It's an important time to send any support we can; I know that this month they were struggling to find money to feed the kids.

Practitioners who would like to come and work at Odanadi can contact World Medicine via www.worldmedicine.org.uk

We are always looking for good people. It's a truly incredible experience.

Sean's work in India has been supported by World Medicine, a charitable organisation, which operates around the world providing complementary and alternative healthcare to people affected by disaster and poverty. When I talked to Sean, he was in England, but preparing to go back to India.