



Scenes from the GAP visit to Vietnam | Photos: Jane Portnoy

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GAPPING WITH VIETNAM

Jane Portnoy

This August I was lucky enough to go to Vietnam with the Haemophilia Treatment Centre (HTC) team from the Alfred. There has been a relationship between the Alfred HTC and haemophilia services in Vietnam for nearly 20 years. The World Federation of Hemophilia has supported the Vietnamese services in their GAP and Twinning programs. When reflecting on this trip, my question to myself was what could I bring to a country I don't know, with resource needs that I can't meet. I also wanted to think about how this trip could contribute to the service that I provide to my work here in Melbourne.

HAEMOPHILIA SERVICES

The hospitals in Vietnam seem familiar yet also really different. The teams looking after the patients consisted of doctors, nurses, and to a small extent, allied health, comprising social workers and physios. I was struck by the closeness and lack of space. In one hospital visitors were limited to only one per patient. There was no privacy, but there was a warmth in the rooms that I was lucky enough to visit. The team knew all about their patients and the treatment that they needed. Laughter and support were common and there was a lot of sharing of experiences.

My frustration was that I couldn't talk to the patients unless there was an interpreter as most patients didn't speak any English. Learning to say 'Xin Chào', 'hello' in Vietnamese, was a great ice breaker, and even the small kids were helping me with my pronunciation.

Hand gestures, and games were another way that the barriers were broken down. Activities during our visit included challenges to solve in teams, involving toys and a parachute, and one of the most powerful aspects of my time in Vietnam was seeing the collaboration, and strong bonds between patients and their hospital teams.

SOCIAL WORK

There are similarities and differences between social workers across the two different countries. Social work in Australia is an established and respected career. In Vietnam it is an emerging concept. There are few social workers, and many are not trained in social work; they have come to work in their position through other pathways, such as nursing or administration. A key role of the social workers in Vietnam is dealing with funding for health care. Without their assistance many patients would not be able to receive the treatment that they need: sometimes it is the trip to the hospital itself that is unmanageable. By comparison, in Australia we are able to provide treatment to everyone in an emergency and all citizens receive home treatment if they need it. As a social worker I am able to help patients with psychological issues, emotions, family relationships, and all manner of practical challenges, as well as supporting them to manage financial barriers to treatment and care. I felt so fortunate to work in Australia, within a comparatively well-resourced service.



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EDUCATION SESSIONS

While we were there, the Alfred team gave many education sessions on treatment and care that we had tailored for the teams in Vietnam. I spoke about social work concepts and the way that we work with individuals and families in Australia. The Social Workers were keen to hear about psychological interventions, and are starting to realize that this work is valuable, and enables patients to recover faster, use less resources and feel better in themselves. They are also becoming aware of the particular impact of having haemophilia.

One of the most positive aspects of their program is the development of the Vietnam Hemophilia Association. I met a number of young men for whom this was very valuable. It enabled them to develop links and develop confidence, find career paths suitable to their health and make friends with others who have had similar experience through their life with haemophilia - for example, having mothers who were super protective, or missing out on activities at school.

I had a brief session with social workers in Hanoi looking at how they work and I was very impressed both with their knowledge of their patients, and the large numbers of patients that they work with.

I am looking forward to continuing my relationships and work with the Vietnamese haemophilia social workers. H