

Consultant Ophthalmologist Glan Clwyd NHS Trust

As a young doctor one thing that attracted me to Ophthalmology was the fact that it is a very portable specialty. Cataracts, short sightedness, glaucoma, squints etc exist the world over and many diagnoses can be made with little knowledge of local language and with easily carried instruments. So when Sarah Parry asked me to visit Slatina this August I was very interested, although a little cautious knowing that this was a new project. The aim of the project was to examine the eyes of children at Casa Luminii and also at the orphanage at Balş in order to identify children who might benefit from further ophthalmic treatment, possibly at a large hospital in Bucharest.

Over one rather busy weekend we set up mini eye clinics and 29 eye examinations were done. Initially this involved assessing the children's vision, sometimes not easy if children had little or no speech but using exciting toys, sign language and lots of pictures we could roughly gauge visual acuity. Subsequently I examined the children's eyes through dilated pupils to look for things like retinal detachment or abnormalities in the growth or development of the eye. Drops are used to dilate pupils. In the UK a lot of youngsters hate having eye drops put in and there's always a lot of cajoling, rewards of sweets and stickers and even then sometimes a few tears. By comparison I was surprised to see how uncomplaining these Romanian children were. Perhaps eye drops were nothing compared to what they had endured in their past.

The final part of the eye test was to check whether glasses were needed. In the UK and most developed countries, children receive sight checks in school or nursery and those who fail the test are referred on to the hospital eye service. So most children who need glasses will receive them. This does not happen in Romania and children in orphanages in particular may never receive the glasses they need. Up until about the age of 8 a child's vision is developing and in order for the brain side of vision to mature properly a clear image must be focused on the retina at the back of the eye. If this does not occur until adulthood the eye will never see well even if it is structurally normal. This problem is called amblyopia. It quite commonly affects one eye. Obviously it is a tragedy when both eyes are involved. One of my clearest memories from the trip to Balş orphanage was being shown a 16 year old lad who had bilateral amblyopia. His visual difficulties had gone largely unnoticed or ignored as a young child and although he was extremely short sighted (minus 22) he had as far as I am aware never worn glasses. Even with the glasses which I prescribed he will probably never see very well. Obviously Romanian children need vision screening to be established. This is something I will be discussing further with an organisation called Vision 2020 who work in many countries trying to improve standards of eye care. Lets hope by the year 2020 children in Romania are not being deprived in this way.

In addition to writing out lots of glasses prescriptions I also saw lots of children with squints. Big squints are quite disfiguring and can usually be corrected surgically. I hope some of the children may be able to benefit from surgery once their vision is stabilised. To lose an eye in

an accident is obviously an awful thing but it is vital for that individual that the artificial eye and socket are well cared for and cosmetically acceptable. I was introduced to one young boy at Balş whose eye socket was constantly discharging. He should have specialist care to correct this problem. For children with little or very poor sight often there is no cure but recognising their difficulty and providing appropriate visual aids is a vital step.

To visit a Romanian Orphanage for "deficient" children is a depressing experience but I am so encouraged by the knowledge that Alex Micu has managed to secure a room at Balş where she will be able to work regularly with children who so desperately need the loving support and stimulation that Alex and her team can provide. My long weekend in Romania was a very memorable experience and after spending a few hours working in a darkened room it was wonderful to spend a day in the Romanian countryside. The children had a wonderful barbecue under the trees and there were huge numbers of butterflies amongst the wild flowers and herbs by the riverbank. Marius (age 10) and I even learned how to fish with long nets across the river. There is a huge amount of work going on at Casa Lumini and it was a privilege for me to see the way in which children with such varied and difficult problems can be helped by a structured programme in the really caring environment provided by Alex and Sandu. Spending 4 days with a group of psychologists (apparently the collective term is "a complex") was very enlightening and fun and I learnt an awful lot from Suzanne, Cliff, Evan and Sarah.

I am so grateful to Sarah for organising this trip at the end of August and I sincerely hope that a number of children may gain benefit from the eye examinations done.

