

In June, I visited Casa Luminii for six days, with Sarah Parry and Hayley Lee. As I had previously been to Romania six years ago, I was already aware of the very difficult lives of many ordinary people there -which I found to be an eye-opening and humbling experience. This visit, my first to Slatina, made me question why, when the speed of modernisation was clearly apparent, were so many lives of orphans were still being so neglected by the state. However, the visit was also one of inspiration -observing first-hand the energy and sheer dedication of the whole team involved in various aspects of the project.

As a researcher at the Centre for Women's Mental Health Research at the University of Manchester, I am aware of the importance of a consistent and stimulating social environment for healthy development particularly in vulnerable groups. This was a recurring theme for me during our visits to the Treatment Centre and government apartments. Although I had taken a case full of new clothes and toys for the children, it didn't take any time to realise that what these children so desperately need (in the absence of a regular caregiver) is positive social interaction and the space to do this. Even in the government apartments (which I believe are much better than the orphanages), 'care' is inconsistent and often detrimental to the children, by staff who are given no or almost no training. In what is considered the best apartment, those care assistants who volunteered to be filmed playing with 18-month-old Dorin showed extremely poor carer sensitivity and responsiveness. Employing a standardised assessment (CARE-Index; Crittenden), these care assistants were found to be controlling and the interaction can be classed as high-risk. There appears to be a misunderstanding about what constitutes positive care and interaction among at least some staff. They claimed that such vigorous manipulations of the child's body or 'exercises' helped the children to walk. The staff did not take the crying to be a distress signal, as they were obviously desensitised to it. Sadly, Dorin had actually been misdiagnosed as having HIV; therefore until a couple of months ago, he had been confined to his cot. Needless to say, all this intrusive 'play' was frightening to the infant. He had actually got to the stage of being more comfortable on his own, which does not bode well for his development without intervention.

Fortunately, those children in the apartments who attend the treatment centre for the morning sessions get the opportunity to play how they like with access to a range of toys and better staff, which has already made a noticeable difference to these children's lives. However, it doesn't take long to realise that what the children need is one-to-one intensive care, which is why the respite care home is such a good idea. On Saturday, we went to see the land where the building is about to begin for the home, to be named after Sarah Bazley in recognition of all her amazing hard work as the director of the Orphans' Family Project! With this charity-funded home, it will be possible to take children there a week at a time to work intensively with them. I hope to follow closely and possibly also develop some observational research on in the future on the long-term benefits of the home.

Most of all, as these children start to improve and get fostered, I hope that one day, the Government will see that it does not make sense to provide a system that is so detrimental for these children. Simple changes can make an unbelievable difference to individuals' lives, such as having more consistent staff/caregivers, more staff training, more considered use of space, and more consideration when matching children to live together. I believe that the various research projects that are going on will go some way to increase this understanding. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sarah for inviting me to Slatina to get involved with the project and to Alex for being such a brilliant host during our visit.

