

Travellers' tales: Developing clinical neurorehabilitation in Iran

Barbara A. Wilson & Jill Winegardner

Professor Barbara A. Wilson (founder of the Oliver Zangwill Centre) and Dr Jill Winegardner (Lead Psychologist at the Oliver Zangwill Centre), were invited to give a four-day workshop and two lectures in Iran in early April 2015. This article is a personal description and reflection of their experience.



WE WERE INVITED by Dr Hamed Ekhtiari, a medical doctor and a cognitive neuroscientist from Tehran, the capital of Iran, and were funded by a government grant to cover our costs. We left London Heathrow on Thursday 2 April to fly to Istanbul where we had to spend two nights in order to collect our visas for Iran. On Saturday 4 April we left Istanbul for Tehran, arriving late at night. Before disembarking we had to make sure we were appropriately dressed. This meant no bare arms or legs, scarves over our heads and covering our necks. After some questioning at immigration we were allowed through and met by two of our hosts, Tara Rezapour and Fatemeh Mosavi, and taken to the Parsian Azadi Hotel, one of the largest in Tehran. The following day began with a short meeting about the week with Dr Ekhtiari, and then sightseeing.

The workshop took place at one of Tehran's hospitals. We had about 50 participants, many of them students at Tehran university who were studying cognitive

rehabilitation, and a fair number of occupational therapists, including some lecturers in occupational therapy from the university. We shared the delivery of the talks and the workshop exercises covering: general principles of neuropsychological rehabilitation; assessment; and strategies for managing attention, memory, executive, perceptual, behavioural and social communication problems. The audience was very engaged, many questions were asked, and our style was appreciated. We presented the views of the Oliver Zangwill Centre, stressing that rehabilitation should be holistic, a partnership of professionals and family, and should address not only cognitive, but also emotional and psychosocial issues. We criticised computer-based cognitive training exercises because of lack of evidence and emphasised the need to evaluate and seek evidence for the efficacy of rehabilitation.

Each lunchtime and evening, different participants shared the meal times with us in order to discuss their studies and learn from our visit.

On Friday morning we rose very early to fly to Shiraz, Iran's sixth largest city. This is where Shiraz wine originally came from, although of course alcohol is now forbidden in Iran (the earliest wine in the world came from Shiraz 7000 years ago!). After leaving our overnight bags at the lovely Hotel Shiraz where we were to spend Friday night, we drove 70 kilometres to Persepolis, city of the ancient Persians, and a Unesco world heritage site. It was splendid, but very hot and difficult, as women have to be covered up; the men are allowed to be far more casual. In the afternoon we visited some

beautiful gardens and the tombs of two of Iran's famous poets.

On Saturday lunchtime, we gave a talk on 'Cognitive Rehabilitation' at Shiraz University. Most of the participants there were physiotherapists and less interested than those in Tehran. After a late lunch we returned to the airport to fly back to Tehran. Shiraz is a more beautiful city, with less traffic than Tehran. However, the snow capped mountains surrounding Tehran were lovely.

Sunday was a busy day. We gave a lecture at the university first and felt that went well. This was followed by a discussion about the future of rehabilitation in Iran. Some very eminent people were there and a lively discussion took place. We felt that we were in at the beginning of rehabilitation services in Iran, and had hopefully provided some ground rules on the way to ensure good rehabilitation practices. The day ended with a final discussion with four senior members of the Strategic Council of Foreign Relations, chaired by the president, Kamal Kharrazi, previously Foreign Minister in the Iranian government, who had worked with Robin Cook and Jack Straw. We left for home very early the next morning.

The visit was certainly interesting and worthwhile. The people we met were wonderful. So many of them welcomed us to their

country and said they hoped we would be happy there, some wanted their photographs taken with us. We were treated extremely well and the hospitality was exceptionally good. We realised how difficult it is for the Iranians, because of the sanctions, to access books and tests (they cannot, for example, order anything from Amazon or purchase neuropsychological tests from the international test companies). They are an educated people with a very low rate of illiteracy and want to do the best for their country. Our only complaint was that we had to abide by the same dress code as the locals, even though we are from a different culture. We never talk about clothes at home, yet much of our conversation in our hotel room was about what to wear and whether our outfits were appropriate. Nevertheless, we were grateful for our experience and left Iran with feelings of admiration for the enthusiasm and intelligence of the professionals we met, and look forward to Iran developing excellent neuropsychological rehabilitation. In particular, we wish to thank Dr Hamed Ekhtiari, Tara Rezapour, Fatemeh Mosavi and Jamal Hameshi for making our visit so special.

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