

East Timor's appeal for help

Since gaining independence in 1999, East Timor has commenced the long and challenging road in developing itself as an independent country.

AS A COUNTRY with high rates of disability, the development of rehabilitation services for people with disabilities is an important priority.

It is estimated there are approximately 22 000 people with disabilities living in East Timor, who have received only the most basic, if any, of services until now. Disabilities in East Timor are due to causes such as malnutrition, trauma, communicable diseases such as leprosy, tuberculosis, and malaria.

ASSERT, established in partnership with UK organisation The Cambodia Trust, is an East Timorese non-governmental organisation working for the rights of disabled people. Together, ASSERT and The Cambodia Trust established the Timor Loro Sa'e Centre for Physical Rehabilitation (TLSPR)—Timor's first rehabilitation centre for disabled people. The TLSPR works with other disability organisations in East Timor to provide and develop services for people with disabilities.

The TLSPR specifically provides prosthetic and orthotic services, physiotherapy, and some community-based services.

Physiotherapy services are currently provided by one Australian physiotherapist, Louise Maher, who works closely with three local staff who are receiving on-the-job training. Louise says: 'It is a huge challenge and a privilege working in this environment. There is so much need, people are so poor, and basic services are so very basic. But slowly we are starting to provide some great services, and we can see clients improving and benefiting. It is especially great to see local staff learning more, and becoming more independent in their work.'

Developing the capacity of East Timorese people to provide



Above: ASSERT is the first prosthetic/orthotic workshop in East Timor. Many clients never have had prosthesis or have been using old, heavy, misfitted prosthetic limbs for years prior.

these services independently is a major priority for ASSERT. This is particularly challenging in the physiotherapy area, as East Timor has no training course for physiotherapy or any other allied health services.

East Timor has experienced extensive political and civil unrest since April that has resulted in the presence of international peace keepers (including Australian, New Zealand, and Malaysian army personnel and Portuguese paramilitary police), the resignation of the former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, and the development of Internally Displaced Persons camps throughout Dili. TLSPR was closed at the height of tensions in late May to early July, the, but is now reopened.

ASSERT is almost back to normal and is rebuilding its services, but is still missing two international staff; one a physiotherapist who may consider coming back by January.

Despite all the unrest ASSERT has managed to get two Timorese candidates enrolled for a physiotherapy scholarship at the Politeknik Kesehatan Surakarta in Solo



Left: Participants in the Rehabilitation Training Program, Mateus Soares, Francisco Ximenes, and Tomas Oqui, learn skills to support their work as community-based and midlevel rehabilitation workers in East Timor.

Below: ASSERT Director and prosthetist/orthotist, Cornelis Visser, measures a young client for a prosthetic limb.



(Java) and has also restarted the process of recruitment for the physiotherapy post through volunteer organisations AVI, VSA, PALMS, and VIDA. The two ASSERT employees who have just started a three-year physiotherapy course in Indonesia, will return in 2009 with a vision of leading this service in the future. However, chances that a positive outcome will come soon are rather small.

In the meantime, the three local staff working on the job are participating in The Rehabilitation Training Program; a two year training course being provided by the disability organisations in East Timor. This course includes participatory classroom teaching time and a practical fieldwork component. There are 25 participants in total; many of the others

include community-based rehabilitation workers, who are providing care to disabled people out in the districts.

At a broader level, ASSERT is also involved in the wider development of disability services in East Timor, including disability advocacy, inclusive education and development, and the development of a program for wheelchairs and equipment. Looking to the future, the objective is for ASSERT to be an independent locally managed and run service within seven years.

If you are interested in knowing more about working in East Timor, volunteering your services, or making a donation to ASSERT email: assert@mail.timortelecom.tp, visit: www.asserteasttimor.com, or contact one of the abovementioned volunteer organisations. ■