

Indo-Cleft Conference 2011: Experiences of four Sri Lankan Speech and Language Therapists

By Malka Jayathilake

Four Speech and Language Therapists from Sri Lanka (Ianthe Perera – Lecturer, Department of Disability Studies, University of Kelaniya, Malka Jayathilake – SLT, Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children, Colombo, Saumya Rathnayke –SLT, National Hospital, Colombo, Gimnadee de Silva –SLT, Rathnapura Base Hospital) attended the 10th Annual Meeting of Indian Society of Cleft Lip , Palate and Craniofacial Anomalies (INDOCLEFTCON 2011) including the Pre conference workshop on Assessment and Management of Speech Disorders Related to Cleft lip and Palate from 28 - 30 January 2011. We would like to thank our sponsors, The CLEFT Charity, for their generous support.

The Pre conference workshop on Assessment and Management of Speech Disorders Related to Cleft Lip and Palate conducted by Dr Debbie Sell (SLT, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, London) helped us refresh and update our knowledge on the subject, almost 10 years after our initial training. Further, it gave us the opportunity to self evaluate cleft type characteristics of speech, by listening to a selection of speech samples. In some ways, this session took us down memory lane, when we were students on the SLT training programme all those years ago!

We were fortunate to be a part of the raining provided by Valerie Pereira (SLT, Hong Kong) on ‘Therapy’ in Cleft Lip and Palate. As a group we were able to reflect on therapy strategies we currently use in our practice. In such a forum as this, it was possible to be objective in our analysis and to be critical in a constructive and supportive manner in the feedback we gave each other. There was an understanding that whatever we took away from the conference is bound to benefit us as professionals as well as our clients, who would receive evidence based interventions.

The conference provided us with a fabulous networking environment, to build links with Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals from a host of different countries. In addition, we were able to share knowledge, experiences and practices in cleft care from their respective

countries. A crucial link made during this visit was with Sri Ramachandran Medical College in Chennai, India who have shown a keen interest in supporting with lecturing on the BSc Programme in Speech and Language Therapy as well as a willingness to share their clinical expertise. We felt it was very important to build on these regional links, as they would help us reduce our reliance on the West. As a group of countries with a similar cultural background, we stand to benefit much from sharing knowledge and resources.

What was most enlightening was the steps each country was taking toward building the SLT profession as well as Cleft related services in different nations. One such country that stood out was Ghana. We found the discussions stimulating and thought provoking. It got us thinking outside the 'box' and helped us lay plans for the service development in Sri Lanka. One such endeavour is to further develop the Multidisciplinary Cleft Clinic at the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for the Children' with a focus on using high tech assessment and treatment facilities.

When considering the conference as a whole, including the symposiums and free papers, it helped us to learn about the role of other professionals in cleft management. It made clear different professionals' expectations from each other in the holistic management of children with cleft lip and palate. We felt that these sessions were very helpful in clarifying how the same objectives can be reached by a team, taking very different intervention approaches.

We were impressed by the depth and breadth of topics covered by the poster presentations. While it was daunting to realize the sheer volume of work that lay ahead of us, it was also encouraging to know that most people have had similar starting points to us. SLT is no longer in its infancy in Sri Lanka. Its natural next step is to embark on research. What better place to start than in cleft work, which was the reason for setting up an SLT programme in Sri Lanka!