

The Gospel School for the Deaf in Suva, Fiji

During the periods 31st January to 6th February and 17th to 24th April, my wife Cristy (a post-graduate audiology student who has some expertise in sign language) and I visited the Gospel School for the Deaf in Suva, Fiji. Most of our time was spent testing children and fitting hearing aids. The school is funded privately by a charity and has 48 pupils in primary school and 9 older students integrated in high school. The school was set up nine years ago and, until mid-2005, none of the children wore hearing aids. It appears that the initial funding for the school came as an initiative from its founder, a lady called Viviane Harland, who has a profound hearing loss and who began teaching deaf children in her home. She was successful in raising the money to build the school which is a three-storey modern building with pleasant classrooms. She has close links with the Fijian Deaf Association and the teaching staff have some connection with this organisation. The medium of instruction is a Fijian version of British/Australian Sign Language. Most of the teachers do not hold formal qualifications but were selected for their ability to sign and for their motivation. (The alternative would apparently have been to accept trained teachers allocated by the Fijian government education department who would not have been able to communicate with the deaf students at the school.)

The situation at the school is an interesting one. It is probably fairly typical of many schools for the deaf in the Asia-Pacific region where hearing aids are not available (although in other cases the

hearing aids fitted to children in such schools may be of poor quality and/or are not well fitted). There is a project, organised by the Christofell Blindenmission, in Fijian schools where hearing screening has been carried out on over 200,000 children, but children at the school were identified by informal means and are mostly severely or profoundly deaf. We did not record the age of diagnosis for the children at this stage, but it is likely to be much later than in Australia. Identification is likely to be influenced by the extent of the loss, and consequently deafer children will be more easily picked out.

The school is partly residential, due to the need to avoid children travelling long distances and the



Cristy Newall with the Grade 1 class.

accommodation is pleasant. There is another school for the deaf in Fiji called the Hilton School which seems to be organised by the Catholic Church, and I understand that there are about 30 multiply handicapped children at that school. The Gospel School for the Deaf seems to take children who have only a hearing loss with no other disability. The children appear to be generally well-nourished, healthy and happy. Few

seem to have any oral language, and many appear to sign fluently.

Some of the deaf children attend the associated school for normally hearing children which is on the same campus and which caters for children of all ages and is run by a religious group. It appears that the normally hearing children at this school are being taught sign language and the 9 older children with hearing loss have been integrated into the hearing school using sign language interpreters. This is a rather unusual situation, as the deaf children seem to be quite welcome at the high school and there is interaction between the pupils.



Greg Upfold examines a student.

This and several other factors make the Gospel School for the Deaf rather unusual. One is the presence of volunteers from the United States of America. On our last visit, there was a mathematics teacher, a school nurse, and a head of services, who were long term volunteers and an occupational therapist, who was visiting for a month. The director of the school is Jim Cooney who is a long-term volunteer and who, before his retirement, taught in and administered schools for the deaf in the USA for over thirty years. His experience is really considerable

and his presence at the school is really making a difference.

Another factor is the six visits to the school made since April 2005 by the Carabez Alliance, an Australian charity run by Bronwyn and Jeff Carabez who are assisted by their daughter, Virginia, who has a severe hearing loss. An experienced audiologist, Greg Upfold, is a member of the team and has visited the school on several occasions. The main motivation is to fit the children with hearing aids, to maintain them, and to encourage the use of oral language to supplement the sign language used in the school. It is intended that local people will be encouraged to take on or at least to assist with the hearing aid maintenance role, which will be significant, when the children have all been fitted. Equipment has been donated or borrowed (see appendix) and the school has an audiometric sound-treated booth.

One major issue is that some of the children have a really profound loss and it is doubtful if they will benefit



Bronwyn Carabez with children from the school in the residential hostel.

to any degree from hearing aids. They are probably in a category where, if they lived in Australia, they would be considered for cochlear implants. This is not feasible in Fiji for economic and other reasons, and consequently it

is intended to fit them with very powerful hearing aids with extended low frequency response. Sign language is probably the best option for these children, especially those in the older age groups.

The children at the school are generally keen to be fitted with hearing aids at the moment, because other children at the school now have them. To date, about 91 Phonak Superfront hearing aids have been fitted and the children appear to be using them, apart from the profoundly deaf male high school students in the mainstream setting who are not wearing their hearing aids. These hearing aids are refurbished ones



Philip Newall examining Shivneel's ear.

which have all been kindly donated by the Phonak hearing aid company. This is a very significant gesture which is central to the whole project. Another 32 earmould impressions were taken on the last visit. One male high school student with a moderate to severe loss does wear an in-the-ear hearing aid which was purchased by his parents from a local hearing aid dispenser. Hearing aids have also been fitted to the two teachers who are deaf and to the hostel staff and to some of the staff working in the high school who have a hearing loss.

The children at the school are very pleasant and friendly. They are trying hard to cooperate with us when we carry out hearing assessments and they seem to appreciate our efforts. It has been really good to see children's faces light up when we first fit a hearing aid and they hear sounds for the first time. Some of the children have begun to use their voices and this was encouraged on our last visit when an Australian teacher of hearing-impaired students came with us and ran some very successful sessions with the children, the teaching staff and parents. We take earmould impressions during our visits and have the earmoulds made up in Polyplus material at Phonak in Australia, but we have also begun to try out an on-the-spot earmould material (Egger-flex/AB) on an experimental basis for temporary earmoulds.

Many of the children had a large accumulation of earwax in their ears and this would seem to be a serious problem. Some also had middle ear conditions which required medical treatment. (One child, Willie, had even pushed the end of a pencil down his ear, presumably due to intense irritation with his ear condition and which the school nurse managed to flush out with a syringe). A local Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist in Suva, Dr Su Hong, was contacted and agreed to see the children at no charge.

Sign language was the only option for the children at the school before we began to fit hearing aids, and would still seem to be a useful medium of communication for them. Signing has enabled the children to communicate easily and independently of hearing aid fittings

and, whilst we are committed to continuing support of the children at the school, we cannot be sure that funding for this will be available. I am not qualified to discuss teaching methodologies, but it seems unwise to discourage the use of sign language and to move a proportion of the children to a more oral form of communication. In any case, at this stage, the ability to engage in auditory training is not a skill possessed by the teaching staff, apart from the director of the school.



The Gospel School director, Jim Cooney signing the Youth Ambassador agreement with the AusAid representative in Fiji, Jennie Teasdale

We have been fortunate in obtaining a scholarship for an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) volunteer which is funded by AusAid. This is a scheme which provides funding for volunteers under the age of 30 to visit developing countries to assist in various ways. We have asked for an audiologist to help at the school and with a number of associated projects. A visit was made to the school by Jenny Teasdale who is the local Fijian representative of AYAD to discuss this issue. The successful applicant is Andrew Myles who is a member of staff of the Audiology Clinic at Macquarie University. He will work at the school for six months starting on 15th of June 2006. This will really help to consolidate the

progress which has been made with the hearing aid fittings.

A visit was made to the University of South Pacific campus in Suva and discussions were held with Associate Professor Akhila Sharma and Joyce Heeraman from the Department of Education and Psychology. It is hoped that the training of teaching staff at the school can be improved by means of this contact. Joyce Heeraman visited the school whilst we were there to organise visits by students on the teacher training program who need to acquire experience in a school for the deaf.

In conclusion, it seems that considerable progress has been made and on the next visit all children will have been fitted with hearing aids. It has been a really rewarding experience and it is hoped that we can continue with this important work which is assisting with the problems of the hearing impaired in Fiji.

Philip Newall
25 April 2006

Appendix: Equipment and Facilities

- Audiometric acoustically treated booth
- Interacoustics AD17 audiometer
- American Electromedics Screening Tympanometer
- Fonix FP40 hearing aid test system
- Dremel earmould drill
- Auditory trainer (manufacturer unknown)
- Welch-Allyn aurascope/auditory screener
- Heine fibre-optic otoscope
- Soldering iron and multimeter