

## Helping orphans and disadvantaged children in Romania

Last month many of you would have seen the ITV documentary where Sarah Ferguson and her young daughters visited Romania and Turkey undercover to investigate the institutions in which many abandoned children and adults find themselves in. This programme was a chilling reminder of our own visit to Romania only the week before. As you know, Pauline and I spent a week in Bucharest teaching infant massage to a number of professionals that work with abandoned babies, disabled children and young, single mothers.

We recently collaborated with the psychology department at Dundee University on a small research project looking at the benefits of infant massage and it was Dr Zeedyk who introduced us to the work of Emanuela Chiritescu in Bucharest, Romania. Emanuela gave up her career in teaching a few years ago to form a charity to help care for the many abandoned babies in the hospital in her district in Bucharest and work with foster parents who look after the abandoned babies. She then went on to open up a Maternal Centre with 8 places for single mothers who ordinarily would have abandoned their babies at birth and left them for the state to rear in an orphanage. Emanuela is a determined and resourceful woman who raised the funds from donations in Romania and abroad as well as some government funding.

Even since the demise of Ceausescu's oppressive regime, where he banned the use of contraception, Romania still has a culture where there is little and in many cases no education about contraception. This has resulted in Romania having the highest rate of abortions in the world and pro-life groups have been campaigning for mothers to continue with their pregnancies. However, there is still a huge stigma attached to single mothers and many are disowned by their families when they find themselves pregnant. It has long been accepted that unwanted babies, for whatever reason, are given up to the state to be reared.

The government is working with families to foster and adopt many of the babies, but this process is quite lengthy. This is hindered beyond belief if a child has been abandoned in hospital and its mother hasn't registered the birth. The adoption laws are quite tight now in Romania and the government is duty bound to find the mother or her family for a year before a baby is then allowed to be adopted. These abandoned babies remain in hospital until a suitable foster/adoptive family is found or they move to an orphanage. They are desperately in need of love, stimulation and positive touch to help them thrive and many are not receiving this unless it is from volunteers working in the hospitals.

Many of the children who have been abandoned and grow up in orphanages have real difficulty with the state-run homes and often run away, preferring to manage their own lives by begging for money and living on the streets of the city. Our first encounter of such street children was within 20 minutes of leaving the airport. We were at traffic lights and as soon as the lights turned red the dirty, undernourished little children appeared from nowhere, holding puppies close to their skinny little frames, partly for warmth, partly to appeal to the softer side of their potential benefactors. Our guides offered biscuits and fruit, but no money. All the people we asked about these children were rather cynical, commenting that the children struggle with discipline in the homes. It was a sad indictment of the fate of some of the abandoned babies.

Emanuela's vision has been to help babies so that they do not ultimately fall into these terrible situations. She was very keen to learn about infant massage and could see the huge benefits of its use with the abandoned babies in hospital and for the babies and mothers in her Maternal Centre. After much discussion Pauline and I agreed that we would offer our services free of charge to 24 similarly minded people in the capital city as there is no money for such training programmes. We developed a slightly longer programme based on what we teach in the UK and many of our friends, colleagues, family and former students pledged donations towards the cost of the training resources and for this we are very grateful. Thank you.

We trained GPs, health visitors, physiotherapists, social workers, therapists working with disabled children, educators and volunteers from Maternal Centres and volunteers working directly with the abandoned babies in hospitals. The trainees were super and were extremely grateful for the chance to learn a practical skill that will help them with the mothers and babies. They were stunned by the knowledge they gained about how vital it is for a baby to receive positive experiences and loving touch within the first two years of its life. On a lighter note, we had real fun and we even taught our students many British nursery rhymes! Listening to 24 Romanian adults singing 'this little piggy went to market' was hilarious!

All in all, the trip was an emotional rollercoaster for both of us, but we are extremely glad we went.

*Anita Epple*

## Help To Fund a Volunteer In Romania

One of the trainees that attended our programme was Alexandrina – she is a retired woman, a grandmother, who works in one of the hospitals in Bucharest. She works from 8am until 4pm, Monday until Friday, in the maternity ward looking after abandoned babies. She receives an honorarium of 800 lei *per month* (about £190) for this vital work.

The week we were in Bucharest, included in her charge were 8 newborn babies (all under a week), one 6 week old baby (who was born with a drug addiction) and a four and a half month old baby girl who still remains in the hospital ward as her mother abandoned her on the day of her birth. As her mother didn't register her before she left she cannot be adopted for a whole year. This little baby is beautiful, perfect in every way and bright as a button. She very much reminded me of my own daughter at that age. This little girl, poignantly born on my own birthday in June, was desperate to be held and caressed and very much in need of love, attention and stimulation. She is exactly the kind of baby that will fall foul to the system if she is not given the much needed care she deserves and desperately needs.

Alexandrina was very excited about her new skill and knowledge and couldn't wait to start massaging the babies and promised me faithfully she would massage the baby born on my birthday! However, we learned very soon after the course that the charity that pays Alexandrina's honorarium, Asociatia Semn De Viata, can no longer afford to pay her as they have run out of funds for this project.

I found this news most distressing and as a consequence my partner David and I have promised the charity we will fund Alexandrina's pay for the next three months. If you, having read about our trip to Romania above and the work of this selfless volunteer, Alexandrina, would like to make a contribution to the charity to help fund her honorarium please contact me on [anita@touchlearn.co.uk](mailto:anita@touchlearn.co.uk) or 01889 566222 or Pauline on [pauline@touchlearn.co.uk](mailto:pauline@touchlearn.co.uk) 01908 261274.

Thank you  
Warmest regards  
*Anita*