

The Friends of Vellore – Victorian Branch

Newsletter, 1, 2010

The Victorian Branch of the Friends of Vellore has some new leaders. Ian Weeks is the new President while John Gault and Evelyn Lehmann are the joint Treasurers. Louise Joy stays on as the Secretary. The new committee would like to express thanks to the outgoing President (Roger Oakden) and Treasurer (Tom Simon), especially for their invaluable work during a time of transition and re-structuring.

It is a great pleasure to chair the Victorian Branch. I have a curious and indirect relationship with the Vellore Hospital and Medical School. In early 1937 my parents, Ruth and Stan Weeks went to Azamgarh, U.P as Australian Methodist Missionaries. Later in 1937 they were joined at Azamgarh by Edna and Ted Gault, both doctors, and also from Melbourne. Early in 1937 these four people joined together for dinner to celebrate Ted Gault's birthday. After dinner they played a few hands of cards when Ruth's waters broke and soon after she delivered me with the assistance of the Gaults. A few years later Ted, Edna and family left the Azamgarh district and began a long and fruitful relationship with Vellore. When I turned seven I began the long trek, by various trains, to Woodstock School in Mussoorie, high up in the Himalaya Mountains. John and Louise Joy (Gault) were also at Woodstock having travelled almost the length of India by train from Vellore.

Over the past few weeks Louise and I, and also Michael James and Jacqueth Riley (James) have talked together about the various ways in which our childhoods in India shaped our lives. The train trips up and down from school played a large part. Growing up in India under British Imperial rule also affected each of us. None of us noticed in these discussions the obvious importance of hospitals in our lives. Hospitals in Azamgarh and Vellore brought us all together and the life of these hospitals played an important part of our daily living. Less obvious but very important was that proximity to these hospitals helped us survive at a time in India when there were not many hospitals and so many Indian children died from the enormous range of diseases endemic then. I remember vividly lining up each year to have a wide range of injections and immunizations administered by one or another of the doctors at the hospital. To my great embarrassment I remember one year making a great song and dance about the fact that the grown-ups were getting more injections than I was getting! I made such a fuss that only the administration of some saline solution injections kept me quiet.

My parents moved from Azamgarh to the outskirts of Faizabad in our last two years in India. They worked in those last years at the hospital and farm established by the Mission to Lepers. Leprosy was and is an appalling disease. Ted Gault, at Vellore also worked with leprosy patients. My memory tells me that Ted Gault worked out a procedure by which muscle grafts were undertaken to repair the tear ducts attacked by leprosy. This procedure enabled tears to flow again across the eyes and this saved the eyesight of many suffering from this terrible disease. The Mission to Lepers Farm at Faizabad made an interestingly different contribution to the well-being of its patients. For much of history people who suffered from leprosy were driven away from the places where they lived. They were condemned to a terrible nomadic existence in which there was little in the way of food and shelter, and even less companionship. The Farm at Faizabad saw leprosy sufferers producing excellent food which soon won prizes in agricultural exhibitions in northern India. With such success the food from the farm became very desirable. This, in turn, gave the patients an enormous sense of satisfaction and well-deserved pride. (In passing I should note that there is another fascinating connection here. The founder of the Mission to Lepers, including the farm in Faizabad, was Donald Miller who also played an important role in Vellore's programme for the sufferers of leprosy. Chapter 11 of The Jubilee Edition of the book *Ida Scudder of Vellore India*, has an interesting few pages on Miller and Vellore)

The Hospital and Medical School at Vellore have made enormous progress over the past century, and now they are at the forefront of medical practice and education in India. Such success makes it tempting to think that our support is not very important any more. The truth is that the hospital and school are like an oasis in a vast desert. Today the hospital faces the immense challenge of improving the quality of health in the lives of the surrounding rural population, and of extending improved health facilities into the country-side. We are told that there is a crisis in regional health care in Australia, and medical schools are all giving this urgent attention. The difficulties Vellore faces in rural health are much greater and deserve our support.

I began writing this Introduction thinking that I would write a paragraph or two, but now I am into a second page! As I have been writing I have also been thinking about what shape I might give to this Newsletter. I imagine that every president has given the Newsletter their own understanding of what can be done. I will be helped if you let me know of your reactions to this Newsletter and of any suggestions you might wish to make.

Ian Weeks

Committee

At our first committee it was agreed that each of the Office Bearers would make available a short statement about what they have done in their life. Here they are:

Ian Weeks – President

Ian Weeks went to Woodstock before returning to Australia. He was educated in Melbourne and at the University of Melbourne. He has been an academic most of his life and taught at Yale (USA), McMaster University (Canada), and Deakin University (Australia). He is currently a Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Melbourne. I had two sons from my first marriage, but the older son died several years ago. My younger son, Karl, married Hayley Muir and late last year they had their first daughter and my first grand-daughter, Zara Margaret. I am married to Zhen Zheng who lectures in Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture at RMIT University. Zhen also has a private practice in Geelong. I have been involved in helping develop a life-long-learning organization in Geelong and am on the academic board of a theological college

Louise Joy – Secretary

Louise Joy was Class Secretary, aged nine, at Woodstock School, in the Himalayan town of Mussoorie. At the conclusion of her Social Work studies at the University of Melbourne, Louise did her final three months Social Work placement at the Mental Health Centre CMC Vellore. Louise and her husband Stewart, who was FOV Vic Treasurer for 15 years, took their four children to India, spending time at Vellore and other scenes of her childhood. In her Social Work life Louise worked in hospitals and family support agencies in Melbourne and London. In her community life Louise was a Local Government Councilor and started a range of groups in Warrandyte through a Coop. Louise has always been active in recruiting people for Vellore Dinners. She joined the committee Friends of Vellore Victoria in the late 1990s holding several positions including Secretary.

John Gault – Co-Treasurer

Has had a connection with Vellore since spending school holidays there as a boy. Studied Medicine in Melbourne. Moved to Bendigo in 1971, and has practiced there as a Physician - now a Cardiac Physician, ever since.

Spends a lot of his spare time listening to music with his wife – Ann Parris; and playing different musical instruments with varying degrees of success.

Has been on many medical committees, and was Medical Advisor to the private hospital in Bendigo during successive name changes – Mount Alvernia, Mount Alvernia Mercy and the St John of God Hospital, Bendigo. Has now retired from all committees, but has taken on the job of co Treasurer of Friends of Vellore, Victoria.

Evelyn Lehmann – Co-Treasurer

Full time Medical Practice Manager for John Gault, mother of three grown sons.

Member of the Rotary Club of Bendigo Sandhurst and does some voluntary work with Australian Red Cross in Bendigo. Enjoys travelling and lived overseas in Europe in 2005.

Dear Friends of Vellore,

We are the new treasurers of Friends of Vellore, (Victoria).

You may have heard of the Scottish couple who won the Irish sweepstakes. The wife said to her husband - "Jock, what shall we do about the begging letters" where upon he replied - "Keep sending them out!"

We find with a number of charities and organizations that even if you give a yearly donation, another request for funds will shortly arrive.

We plan to avoid this, by sending out a yearly request for funds about this time of year. All donations are tax-deductible, and we will send you a receipt.

Of course, we want to make sure that the maximum amount goes to Vellore, so if you receive this by mail, and have an email address, (even if it is a family member or friend who can print the newsletter for you) we would be glad to have it.

If you wish to be taken off our mailing list, please let us know.

The Biographies of Drs Ted & Edna Gault are still available at a cost of \$15 each – plus postage. The money goes directly to the Friends of Vellore.

Yours Sincerely,
John Gault & Evelyn Lehmann, Joint Treasurers

The FOV Victoria is a Branch (agent for fundraising) of the Australian Board of the Vellore Christian Medical College and Hospital; therefore it does not require formal organisation structures, audits etc. but it does need a group of people who can work together in organising fundraising activities for the next

12 months. Already, Saturday August 14, 2010 has been allocated as an event evening to coincide with the AGM of the Australian Board (see below) and we are hoping that the fundraising dinner will be held in May/June 2010. Can you help? If you can provide a little of your time, please contact the Secretary, Louise Joy at:

fovvsecretary@gmail.com or phone her at 0433 326 816.

Or how about remembering CMC Vellore on your birthday? On the day you receive best wishes and maybe gifts, why not send a gift to CMC?

Please remember CMC Vellore in your thoughts and make a donation - \$50 will help. Please send your gifts and donations to the co-Treasurers. **203 View Street, Bendigo, VIC 3550.**

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What is happening in Australia?

The most interesting point from the viewpoint of Friends of Vellore, Victorian Branch, was that in 2008-09, funds transferred to CMC from Australia were \$280,000, with the main beneficiaries being \$137,284 for the Palliative Care Centre and \$98,716 for the Yelagiri Retreat Centre for students and staff. This was a magnificent effort by the Friends organizations around Australia.

The Victorian Branch has contributed the sum of \$20,000 for the year 2009-2010.

As the AGM rotates around the States, the next AGM of the Australian Board of CMCH Vellore will be in Melbourne on Saturday August 14, 2010. For your diary, the FOV Victoria will be having an event on that evening.

What is happening in Vellore?

In Australia there are problems about meeting the health and needs of rural and regional people. Those problems are all the more difficult in India, not least because of the size of the population and the size of the rural population. It is clear that an adequate medical service cannot work if it is like a small oasis in a very large desert. How can medical and health needs be met outside the grounds of the hospital?

One intriguing part of an answer was heard on Radio National's The Health Report on the 1st of February, 2010. The programme had two parts both connected with Vellore Hospital and the Christian Medical College in Vellore. Here is the first part of that programme. Norman Swan interviewed Professor Anna Tharyan. A transcript of this fascinating interview can be obtained from the Radio National Web site, details of which can be found at the end of this report.

The Health Report Interview

Anna Tharyan: After 26 years of working within the confines of a large teaching department of psychiatry I was invited by a man who had organised a not for profit organisation to just, as he said, do rounds on the street. He says doctor, you're going round and round your hospital wards, would you care to come with me down the street and see how many of your patients sit by the roadside? And this man who hasn't completed a school education opened my eyes to the vast section of the people who need professional psychiatric help who were not existing as far as we were concerned.

Norman Swan: What did you see when you went on the streets?

Anna Tharyan: We chose a 3 kilometer distance going into the heart of the town. So actually we were going from a rural, urban transition area to the heart of a large bustling city.

Norman Swan: To explain the medical school is set in very rural grounds on the outskirts of the town.

Anna Tharyan: Right, so I was a chauffeur and he was directing my driving, we stopped at every person sitting on the wayside who was clearly mentally ill, either talking to themselves, or with long matted hair, or collecting rubbish, or eating from the garbage piles. So we stopped at each of these people and tried to have a conversation with them. And I discovered that although they looked alone and desolate there were people around them who were bathing them, were shaving them, feeding them and if they got physically ill contacting people who could help.

Norman Swan: So whilst you would have thought these were the hopeless homeless they were the centre of social support?

Anna Tharyan: Well it's probably an exaggeration to say that each of these were cocooned within a network like this but I found that this person who is sitting in the dust apparently all alone the minute I got out of the car and went and spoke to him the nearby owner of a teashop would come and say so what is it you want with this man? As if they were suspicious that we were going to do something harmful to him. And then once they knew where we were coming from and what we wanted they would tell us the history of this man.

Norman Swan: Tell me some of the stories that you heard?

Anna Tharyan: Oh, let me tell you about probably a 50 year old lady who for the last 20 odd years has been living under a tree in front of a pawnbroker's shop on the side of a 4 foot dirt road. She has matted hair which forms a huge bundle on the top of her head, she's not smelly but she obviously hasn't had a bath for a long time and she has a wooden box in which there are I would guess 50 notebooks in which she has scribbled, illegible scrawl, but neatly every line is covered. And she has been sustained by this pawnbroker whose shop she sits outside, he describes her as a blessing from God.

Norman Swan: A blessing from God?

Anna Tharyan: Yes, she cleans the front yard, she keeps all the dogs out of the place, she shoos away the monkeys and she is so affectionate towards him and his family that she has now become part of his family. I asked him, why won't you shoo her away because sometimes she just gets up and shouts into the air? But he says I think she has been sent by God to complete my family. So when his son got married he actually brought her a new sari which she may not have accepted because she is very suspicious but she is part of his family.

Norman Swan: And despite that he accepts that she sleeps outside under the tree?

Anna Tharyan: Yes, because she will not accept shelter. I personally asked her and he has asked her many times whether he could hire a place for her to sleep in. She says no, and the reason is she says she is keeping accounts for the government treasury. So all these notebooks are records of how much the government has spent and if she's not there she says there will be no end to the corruption that will take place. So she has to stay under that tree.

Norman Swan: She's keeping India honest?

Anna Tharyan: Yes and he accepts that so now she's too old to cook so he provides her food from a stall nearby.

Norman Swan: And when you say too old to cook at the age of 50 she's prematurely aged by western standards?

Anna Tharyan: Yes, absolutely, she's fragile, she's finding it difficult to walk, I suspect she has some nutritional deficiency. She chews a lot of betel nut and leaf but she's mobile and she steadfastly refuses to accept any help.

Norman Swan: And probably protects his shop as well?

Anna Tharyan: And this has been a happy co-existence for 20 years now. If I were to force this lady to come into a home and we don't have well run places for the destitute, if I were to force her to take medication, would I be doing her a favour? I don't have anything else to offer her really, I have one home run by the missionaries of charity who would accept her but she's refused. So what I do now is to keep in touch with her, I'll just drop by and say how are you and that's all she wants, that's all she'll accept.

Norman Swan: How many people did you encounter down the road?

Anna Tharyan: In 3 kilometres we saw 14 people, all men, except for this lady.

Norman Swan: And what proportion of them were cocooned in her way?

Anna Tharyan: I would say that almost all these people would have had the benefit of the attention of somebody nearby. There was one mentally retarded and obviously psychotic boy who could barely walk. He was living in a bus shelter, he was obviously incontinent and yet when we saw him he was fairly clean. So we walked 5 yards down and asked a lady who was washing her clothes in the yard outside about this boy and she said yes, my father in law bathes him and cuts his hair once in two months and we feed him regularly. And then as we were talking to this lady we saw a man on his two wheeler with huge bags suspended on either side stop, take out a package of food and open it in front of this boy with a bottle of water and started feeding him by hand. So we went up to him and said OK, who are you and who is this boy? So he says hello, I'm a trader I'm taking tea from one small town to sell in another small town. So we said how do you know this boy? I don't know him but I see him when I pass by this road every day and he could have been my brother, so now I bring a packet of food whenever I come this way and I know he can't feed himself - I've seen dogs come and eat the food which I've given him because he can't feed himself so I feed him. So he finishes feeding him and goes on his way.

Norman Swan: And these are people who in Australia people would be scared about and we talk endlessly about the stigma of mental illness.

Anna Tharyan: We have people who are scared of these people as well; we have people who don't even see these people. So when I talk about these people to my peers they say but where are they? It's almost like we learn to ignore them like the plastic bags lying on the side of the road or we are afraid of

them because they may be violent. Anyway, what can we do? But these people are not asking anyway what is the use of giving him packet of food today, he'll starve tomorrow - they are not asking that. They are saying is there anything I can do and they are doing it.

Norman Swan: And you translated that into your practice.

Anna Tharyan: I think that would be a difficult conclusion to reach but what I have done is I've learnt that my training teaches me that I need this vast fund of theory and practice governed by science. I've learnt from this social phenomenon that we also need a reaction from the heart. Let me tell you about this 20 odd year old man and his wife who have completed a diploma in computer applications. They come from a low, low middle class family and after having finished their training and set up a small what they call a computer centre which is basically word processing, he has set up a home for destitute mentally ill and now is looking after 30 people.

Norman Swan: 30 people and he's done that off his own bat?

Anna Tharyan: Of his own effort, in fact when he first decided that he should not allow his fellow human beings to eat from the gutter and get injured by passing cars he collected about 10 of them and took them in a van at his own cost to the main mental hospital in the nearest big city. And he was told by the magistrate that there is no way we could admit them because they need to be admitted for a period of 48 hours to confirm that they were mentally ill, this is required by law. So he said OK so admit them and the magistrate said no, no you bring them back tomorrow. So he took them the next day and the magistrate said OK now you can go. They turned the corner and this guy had let them go on the streets again.

Norman Swan: He wouldn't schedule them?

Anna Tharyan: He wouldn't admit them. So realising there was so much resistance he took them all back home and then hammered on the doors of the government to give him a licence to practice. He didn't go through the health service, he went through the rehab social welfare, was given permission to run this home on the agreement that CMC would give them medical cover.

Norman Swan: The Christian Medical College here?

Anna Tharyan: Yes. So for the last two and a half years we've been sending a doctor and now it is once in two months that we need to go and see the residents there. These two, a young couple, they give them the medicines, they keep immaculate records, they take these men for picnics, they teach them songs in Tamil and there is an atmosphere of acceptance which has inspired even our most hard boiled medical students who are not easily inspired let me tell you.

Norman Swan: Where does the income come for this?

Anna Tharyan: The government provides about I would say 40% of the expenses, he finds the rest and you know what, some of it is coming from this computer centre but a lot of it is being donated by the people of that town. And you can see the community coming together - there's no guarantee that there will be money tomorrow.

Norman Swan: So have you started interventions which encourage those networks to develop around people?

Anna Tharyan: Well I'm almost scared to put my foot in it you know, because what I'm seeing is almost like -

Norman Swan: It's too naturalistic?

Anna Tharyan: Yes, if you go into a jungle in the middle of the night and you sit very quiet you will see creatures coming out of the dark which you will never see during the day and definitely not if you went in there with lights, crews, camera and started analysing the situation. But I have in my own way encouraged other NGOs to bring what they call community volunteers to come and help with projects like this. So I have now created a module which I take over four hours to teach basics of psychiatry to these communities.

Norman Swan: To ordinary people?

Anna Tharyan: Yes, to non-professionals. I'm still at the stage where I'm learning from them so in effect I've joined a circle.

Norman Swan: What's a recognised phenomenon with people with schizophrenia or chronic psychosis whatever their diagnosis might be is that they drift into cities and cities become magnets for these people, nobody's ever really fully explained why that might be. And they often come from long ways away so in Australia they might come from country towns or you might never find out who these people are. You've been trying to find out who they are.

Anna Tharyan: Right, let me tell you what this man without an education who has founded this organisation does. Once the person starts talking, very often when we first find them they're mute. Within about four months with medication they start talking then they tell us where they are from. Just the name of the town or the city and then we ask them are there any landmarks, is there a school nearby, is there a college nearby, is there an office a bank nearby. We call the government telephone network and we ask for three telephone numbers in that area.

Norman Swan: Cold calling as they say from an Indian call centre.

Anna Tharyan: We call these three numbers, describe this person and ask if there's anybody missing from that area. And within three or four calls believe it or not -

Norman Swan: This is six the degrees of separation story?

Anna Tharyan: I think so, we find somebody who knows something about this person.

Norman Swan: This is putting the hair on the back of my neck up.

Anna Tharyan: You won't believe it until you come and see it. We've traced from Vellore which is deep south we've traced people from Nagaland, we've traced people from Allahabad, all up in the north from Maharashtra and we've relocated, we've sent them back to their families.

Norman Swan: So you've reunited families?

Anna Tharyan: Yes and we are helping in some cases because they are really poor, we are helping with medicines. So we've couriered medicines and now what I found is if I keep talking long enough I'll find somebody who's willing to sponsor their medicines locally so we don't even have to carry this burden.

Norman Swan: And is that a happy ending?

Anna Tharyan: Not always, sometimes we find the family is very poor, the family has very low emotional intelligence and just can't understand this man is unwell and not doing this purposely. Or there are multiple members of that family who have a mental illness. They don't seem to be able to carry this person.

Norman Swan: How do you ascertain consent to go back because they may not want to go back?

Anna Tharyan: We've never had the person saying they don't want to go back but we've had the families saying please don't even tell him where we are, we don't want to know. So you know I feel this is in all of us and if the academic circles can change a little bit of their thinking and incorporate some of the principles of this phenomenon into the policy and the planning of community and psychiatry networks I think we'll see a lot of change.

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<http://www.abc.au/rn>

Click on Transcripts then

Click on Mental health research from Southern India.

(The second part of this interview will be found in the next Newsletter.)