

Australia: The daunting task of rebuilding lives

Story by Bob Burton/
Photography by Rahraw Omarzad

Organization **The Treatment and Rehabilitation
Unit for Survivors of Torture and Trauma
(TTRUSTT)**

Location **Brisbane, Australia**



With a beaming smile and sparkling dark eyes, Fatima* excitedly reveals that she has just been offered a job at a major accountancy company. The job offer represents a turning point in her life and she is keen to get home to share her good news with her mother.

Fifteen years earlier Fatima, now in her early twenties, and her family fled their war-torn country and took shelter in a refugee camp in a neighbouring country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated their relocation to Brisbane, the sub-tropical capital of Queensland, Australia. With only one other relative in Brisbane, Fatima's family turned for assistance to the small non-profit organization, the Treatment and Rehabilitation Unit for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

"TTRUSTT was so important for our family," Fatima says. "Whenever we needed help, they were there for us. When I arrived in Brisbane, I didn't know a word of English. With the organization's help I went to the Mater Children's Hospital School and played with other kids and picked up English words. Then they helped find a school for me." Last year, Fatima completed a university degree in accountancy and, with assistance from the organization, found a temporary job as an administrative assistant. While she no longer needs help from TTRUSTT, her mother still seeks their assistance to cope with the trauma she experienced in her home country and to deal with the difficulties of settling in Australia.

The powerhouse behind TTRUSTT is Dr. Aidene Urquhart, a psychiatrist with an unwavering commitment to providing the best possible support services for victims of trauma and torture. "If support can be provided to young family members," she explains, "they can usually rebuild their lives. It is often harder for parents who have directly experienced torture and often shielded their sons and daughters from much of the trauma."



In 1985, while working in the Department of Child Psychiatry at the Mater Children's Hospital in Brisbane, Dr. Urquhart noticed that victims of torture and trauma began appearing as patients. "It quickly became apparent that attending to their medical needs alone was insufficient." Initially, a collaborative project was developed involving a range of community support groups. As information about the project spread through the refugee community, so too did the demand for its support services. In June 1995, TTRUSTT was formally registered as an independent non-profit group.

Each year, approximately 1,000 refugees arrive in Brisbane while another 12,000 find sanctuary in other parts of the country. In the early 1980s, the majority of asylum-seekers in Australia had fled political repression in Chile or the civil wars of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras or Nicaragua. Subsequent groups of refugees had fled the political upheavals of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and, more recently, the conflicts of Burundi, Ethiopia and the Sudan.

"Each successive group is different," Dr. Urquhart notes. "What they have in common is that when they are in their own country they are in survival mode, but when they get here and feel more secure, the magnitude of their trauma and injuries become much more apparent."

The unobtrusive two-storey office building is situated across the road from the Mater Children's Hospital and is located conveniently close to public transport hubs in Brisbane's inner city. The unadorned, cream-coloured walls and high-ceilinged offices create an atmosphere of reassurance and calm.

While the environment is soothing, the pressure felt by the three staff members at TTRUSTT is immense. In 2005, the organization provided assistance to more than 1,100 victims of torture and trauma and their families from over thirty nations. On any given day, up to 20 people may attend the clinic. Appointment times are often grouped according to language requirements in order to make efficient use of interpreters.

The last appointment finishes at 6 p.m. each day. The TTRUSTT staff spends its time liaising on behalf of clients with nearly 100 community groups and Government agencies that provide complementary services ranging from subsidized transport, specialist medical services, access to housing and legal support.

One of the attractions of resettlement in Australia is that it is remote from the origins of the victims' trauma. On the other hand, the distance means that they are separated from the support of family members and friends. Many victims consequently feel isolated and overwhelmed by the daunting task of rebuilding their lives. In addition to the social isolation and language barriers they face, they may feel despondent in a strange country with few work prospects, all of which can cause or exacerbate poor health. For those who were previously employed, owned their own home and belonged to an extended family network, the contrast in lifestyle is profound.

“What many of them say to us is that they feel like a fish out of water,” Dr. Urquhart states. “You can’t help them by just providing a safe environment and social support. They need a lot of other support to assess the extent of their medical needs and then you need to understand the family dynamics,” she says.



Most victims attend prearranged appointments at the organization. It is not uncommon, however, for a highly distressed individual to walk into the office or call seeking urgent help. “Sometimes it is a matter of getting an interpreter on the phone, passing the handset backwards and forwards until we can work out what the problem is and reassure them we can help,” she says. “We have to respond then and there or we might never see them again.”

The TTRUSTT Community Officer, Ana Bran, who has worked for the organization for the last 14 years, notes that arranging for appropriate accommodation is one of their biggest challenges. “Finding good accommodation is a crucial step in creating a sense of security. Sometimes it can take 15 or 20 phone calls just to find a possible house or flat.”

Ms. Bran has occasionally had to reassure wary real estate agents that these individuals will be good tenants. Torture survivors may also have specific accommodation needs. “Some people who were tortured in prison don’t want to live in a house that has exposed internal brickwork that reminds them of a prison cell,” says Ms. Bran. Those who were trapped in multi-story apartment blocks during war may only feel safe with ground-floor accommodation. Others may only feel secure on upper floors. The limited stock of public housing has forced many victims and their families into the private real estate market where appropriate and affordable housing for families on a threadbare budget is scarce.

Some torture victims, who were unaware of TTRUSTT when they arrived in Brisbane, encountered indifferent responses from Government agencies. “When we first arrived we didn’t know anyone...we were given a flat but told we had to move on in one month,” says Blanca, who fled a civil war. After a few weeks in Australia, her husband committed suicide. More than a decade later, Blanca still turns to the organization for support. “I don’t know what I’d do without them,” she says.

Since the establishment of TTRUSTT, the Australian Government has funded a national network of other non-profit groups to provide support services for victims of torture. However, funding guidelines have resulted in an emphasis on short-term projects. One translator who worked in a Government-funded agency and spoke on condition of

anonymity, expressed dismay that staff members were expected to close client files as quickly as possible.

“We were told that we could only have three meetings with the same person...after which they would have to be referred to someone else. It is a bureaucratic restriction that limits the ability to build up trust in both us as individuals and the agency,” she says.

Another survivor, Gloria, recounted the experience of an adolescent asylum-seeker. “There was one boy who went to a Government-funded service and on each of his three visits he had to explain his traumatic experiences to a new person. Not surprisingly, he stopped going.”

In contrast, TTRUSTT offers unlimited support. Previous beneficiaries frequently return during times of personal crises. For those who call on TTRUSTT, Dr. Urquhart’s leadership of the organization from its inception and Ms. Bran’s 14 years of service are crucial to a sense of continuity and familiarity. “It is a feeling that you can come at anytime and ask for anything. It is such a beautiful feeling to know there is someone standing beside you,” Natasa says. “It is a feeling that you can call and they understand you, it is a feeling of friendship and security.” Miroslav adds, “We feel at home here. They care and want to help.” Both current and former clients reserve their highest praise for Dr. Urquhart. “I think I speak for all her clients. Without her, I don’t know what I would have done,” Nermina says.



In spite of its positive efforts, the organization leads a hand-to-mouth financial existence. Over the last decade, TTRUSTT has received modest, but diminishing grants from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. “Fund-raising for victims of torture and trauma is not easy and with such a small staff we can’t afford to divert scarce staff resources,” Dr. Urquhart says.

Two years ago, a funding squeeze forced the organization to end its weekly four-hour group therapy sessions. “As much as we would have liked to continue them, we just couldn’t,” Dr. Urquhart says. “Victims would all look forward to those meetings so much that they would get up at four in the morning to cook special dishes to bring for lunch.” Although the focus of the sessions was creative art activities, the ultimate goal was facilitating a social support network for participants. “The groups were really important. They were a place where clients could access interpreters and talk to clients from other countries. Many people miss coming to those groups,” Dr. Urquhart notes. It’s a view endorsed by Miroslav. “In that group you felt like family...it would be good if they came back.”

Organizations offering similar services in Australia receive financial support from Government agencies. Yet, TTRUSTT maintains there are significant advantages to financial independence from the Government. Ms. Bran says that while independence from Government funding makes it difficult for the organization to fulfil all of its objectives, some refugees are wary of turning to a Government-funded agency after suffering persecution at the hands of their own Government. “The fact that we are funded by the United Nations is reassuring,” she says, “especially for those who came here after receiving assistance from the UNHCR.”

Despite the organization’s registration of more than 1,000 victims and their family members, a significant demand for services remains unmet. Occasionally, the first contact from the family of torture victims with TTRUSTT will be after a family member, usually a young male, has committed suicide. “It is one of the worst things we have to deal with because we know that it was avoidable,” Dr. Urquhart said.

Dr. Urquhart frequently works until late in the evening. But she is adamant about the value of the work of TTRUSTT. “I see the difference we make in such a short period of time,” she says. “I know they couldn’t get the same sort of help elsewhere and we can’t turn our back on them.”