

Medical Group Visit June 2007

In June we brought three medical staff from institutions we support in Gomel region, on an educational visit to Britain. They were:

Victoria, a doctor at the Home for Abandoned Babies in Gomel

Irina, a nurse from Rechitsa Boarding School for Children with Cerebral Palsy

Ludmilla, a felcher (higher qualification than a nurse) from Zhuravichi Children's Home

Liena Fedarchuk, Director of our organisation in Gomel 'Supporting Children Together' and interpreter for the visit



Their first visit was to **Woodlands Respite Care Centre** where we took Ira (see report of her holiday) to settle in.



The group had a quick look around the centre and the very comfortable facilities it offers for the children who stay there, and then we went to visit a remarkable family who foster and adopt profoundly disabled children. The group were very impressed not only with the love and care the family gave the children but also by the sensory environment they had built around them, and by the fact that, with suitable equipment and support, it is possible to look after children at home who would never leave hospital in Belarus.

During the week we also visited two hospital units which care for children with sever disabilities and genetic disorders. The **Nesta Wells Unit at St Mary's Hospital** caters for children with severe learning difficulties and associated health problems. It is a very warm and friendly pace which can give children a high level of medical care, whilst keeping the atmosphere as home like as possible.



We talked about the possibility of setting up something similar, but on a much smaller scale in Gomel. Children with profound health problems who have started life in the Home for Abandoned Babies go on to live at Zhuravichi at four years old. In the baby home they are surrounded by doctors and are minutes away from Gomel's best hospitals. When they get to Zhuravichi, Ludmilla is the most senior medical member of staff and it is a great responsibility to have to care for such children. There is currently one child at the baby home who has such sever

hydrocephalus that it seems inconceivable that she should be sent to Zhuravichi next year, and yet that is the plan if she survives.

It would be great to have a unit where some of the most delicate children from the Baby Home could stay for a while if they were not strong enough to move on. Children at Zhuravichi could come back to this unit when they needed expert medical care; And perhaps some of the children the children's palliative care team look after, could come in to the unit from time to time. I think this is a project we should talk to the Chief doctors in Gomel about to see if we could get them interested in the idea. Sister Sally Turner who showed us round would be interested in visiting Belarus to help us establish such a unit.

The **Transitional Care unit at Booth Hall Children's Hospital** is slightly different. Its main function is to train parents to use ventilators and other pieces of equipment so that they can take their children home. The children then come back onto the ward from time to time to give the parents a break or if the child is not well. We met a wonderful mother on this ward. Her youngest child has a very severe condition and needs constant care. She and her husband devote their lives to looking after and the group all ended up in tears they were so touched by this mums' devotion to a child who would not have survived beyond babyhood if she had been born in Belarus.



Most of the week was spent visiting special schools in Manchester. We went to **Rodney House**, which is a school and assessment centre for children from 2 to 7 years old. We spent much of the visit with some of the youngest and most disabled children and the group were very interested to watch children being fed by gastro tube. The nurse showed us how this was done and talked about the operation. She gave Victoria a spare gastrostomy set to take back to show doctors in Gomel. Victoria promised to talk to surgeons in Gomel Regional Hospital to ask why this operation is not done in Gomel.

They saw many children in standing frames and soon came to appreciate how important this is for every aspect

of the child's development. We have taken standing frames to Zhuravichi in the past – and we can take them to Rechitsa and the Abandoned Baby Home too – but most people in Belarus are unaware of their importance.

Nicola, who organised this visit, gave us some of the children's work to take to Belarus and is very keen to re-establish and strengthen the link with Rodni Kut.

Lancasterian School, for children with physical disabilities, hosted the group for a long and very interesting visit, which included hearing about the integration programme which they co-ordinate across many mainstream schools in Manchester, and visiting the physiotherapy department.



At **Camberwell Park School** in North Manchester they met Mary Isherwood, the Head Teacher who visited Belarus several years ago, when she was Head at Rodney House. This is another bright and attractive school where the group were able to see the physiotherapist fitting a child for a walking frame; have discussions with the nurse about the tube feeding of children; hear how much music and song was used throughout the school day and see the use of symbols, pictures and gestures for non verbal children.

throughout the school day and see the use of symbols, pictures and gestures for non verbal children.

Francis House Children's Hospice, who do so much to support us, organised an afternoon at the hospice for the group. And a very happy evening was spent at the home of Russell Kirby, who as Head of Manchester Disabled Children's Team, has visited Gomel twice. Russell was a great help in interviewing the staff for the Mayflower Centre.



For the last part of the visit we travelled down to Gloucester where we stayed with Freda and Jim Caveen. Most of our educational groups end up visiting Freda where they are always wonderfully well fed and cared for.

In Gloucester we visited Milestone School which is one of the largest Special Schools in the UK, having formerly been three schools for children with different types of disability. It is an excellent school, and another where the Head Teacher has visited Belarus and is very committed to supporting our work.

The group had a very thorough tour of the school and were greatly impressed by the teaching, the atmosphere and the very attractive environment.



And at lunch time they met Dr Imelda Bennett, the Head of the Feeding Clinic at Royal Gloucester Hospital. This was a very useful discussion, touching on nasal and gastro tube feeding, the importance of using food to motivate children (a novel idea in Belarusian institutions), feeding children with cleft palates, and the need for children to be upright and comfortable when they eat. When I mentioned the issue of feeding children in cost at Zhuravichi, Ludmilla said that Natalia the Director, had recently told the staff that if any of them were caught feeding a child lying down in a cot, they would be sacked!

Gloucester was also a chance to see the beautiful cathedral and do some shopping. And then we drove up to Yorkshire to see off the convoy, and were treated to a tour of David Campey's mansion, including seeing his vintage cars.

The three women became good friends during the week. They exchanged phone numbers and have promised to keep in touch. I am sure that they have taken home many ideas which they will try to incorporate into their work. And Ludmilla promised to be positive about any suggestions we make in the future to improve the children's care – she has been a bit defensive in the past. But the most useful outcome of all might be better links between the Baby Home and the two institutions which their most disabled children move on to.



