

## REPORT ON OVERSEAS VISIT TO MALTA: 30 MARCH 1998 - 3 APRIL 1998

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The Technical Support Group, Health Department, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, invited persons from a number of Commonwealth countries to participate in a weeklong workshop, focussing on designing modules for a master's degree for health care workers on Gender and Health, utilising distance education techniques.

The objectives of this visit to Malta included:

- preparing and presenting material to be included in a module on men's health
- participating in sessions on distance education
- sharing views on *Gender and Health* with international and interdisciplinary health care colleagues in order to identify core as well as optional modules to be included in a master's degree on Gender and Health for international health care workers, representing a number of health care disciplines.

Twenty-two representatives from different countries participated in this workshop. The health care professionals included nurses (from the RSA, Swaziland, Ghana, the UK and Malta), medical practitioners (from the RSA and Australia), psychiatrists (from Australia and the UK), health economists (from India), a psychologist (from the UK), a medical sociologist (from the UK), a medical anthropologist (from the USA, even though the USA is not a member of the Commonwealth), a Director of International Health (from Canada) and an educator specialising in international distance education strategies (from Australia). The modules considered for inclusion in a master's degree on Gender and Health included:

- a conceptual framework on gender and health
- research methodology for gender and health issues
- reproductive health (including laws and rights)
- occupational health
- mental health
- violence
- menopause
- traditional medicine
- gender and development
- men's health issues
- sexuality, sexual health, STDs and HIV/AIDS
- ageing
- health promotion and community participation.

Most sessions were conducted as plenary sessions, necessitating co-operation with all the participants, enabling contacts to be established with the following persons:

- Ms S Bonanano, Nurse Manager, Malta
- Prof. L Dennerstein, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne, Australia
- Ms L Dlamini, Nazarene Nursing College, Manzini, Swaziland
- Ms J Douglas, School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK
- Prof. L Doyal, Centre for Health and Social Care, University of Bristol, UK
- Ms F Harding, Secretary, Technical Support Group, Health Department, Commonwealth Secretariat, London
- Prof. SA Matlin, Director, Human Resource Development Division, Commonwealth Secretariat
- Dr D Mazza, Medical Director, Family Planning, Victoria, Australia
- Dr J McIntyre, Chris Hani/Baragwanath Hospital, Johannesburg, RSA
- Mr P Thomas, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK
- Dr D Walker, Commonwealth of Learning
- Dr D Zakus, Director of International Health, Mount Sinai Hospital and the University of Toronto, Canada

The workshop sessions lasted daily from 08:00 until 17:00, followed by organised activities during the evenings. These activities included a gala dinner, excursions to historical places of interest and a visit from Malta's Minister of Health. Very fruitful suggestions arose from these informal contacts during the evening activities. It proved to be much easier to oppose any person's standpoints during small informal discussions than during the organised formal workshop sessions. The workshop was well organised, enabling participants to be actively engaged in pursuing the goals of the workshop whilst establishing international and interdisciplinary health care contacts.

Within four weeks after the completion of the workshop, each participant had to submit his/her revised module for the proposed master's degree in *Gender and Health*. During 1999 the Technical Support Group, Health Department, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, will decide which modules will be incorporated and which ones will be core or optional modules. The presenters of the core modules will

probably be requested to participate in a follow-up workshop during 1999.

Personal objectives included visiting the Department of Nursing, University of Malta, offering a four year BSc degree in nursing. Despite numerous efforts from the RSA and from Malta, this proved to be impossible as the Department of Nursing was engaged in an international conference during this specific week. Attempts to visit St Luke's Hospital, the Government Hospital of Malta also failed to materialise, as a Chinese delegation visited this hospital during the same week. (Craig Hospital on Gozo Island could not be visited because travelling there and back would have been too time-consuming). The Chinese delegation considered making substantial financial contributions towards enlarging the 700-bed St Luke's Hospital of Malta. Hospital and medical care (as well as education) are provided free of charge to Maltese citizens at government institutions. Although many people visit their private medical practitioners and pay for these services out of their own pockets, most people go to the government hospital for free hospital treatment. Only one small private hospital exists in Malta - a visit also proved to be impossible because the managers claimed that the hospital had not yet been fully commissioned.

Although none of the personal objectives could be realised, the week-long workshop proved to be most worthwhile, learning about gender and health issues from international and interdisciplinary experts, and being able to present a session on men's health but also by participating in many other sessions on women's health and distance education issues.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Technical Support Group, Health Department, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, for inviting me to participate in this workshop and for financing all my expenses. My colleagues from the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa, are also thanked for enabling me to attend this workshop even though a number of them had to assume additional responsibilities during my absence.

### Points of interest about Malta

Malta consists of three islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, linked by regular ferry trips. Comino is a small island with one hotel, where no cars or tractors or any other noisy machinery are allowed. Gozo seems to be a peaceful island where large numbers of elderly people and fishermen live. Malta, and especially its capital, Valletta, is bustling with tourists and shops. During April 1998 one Maltese Lire's value equalled that of 1.5 UK pounds - approximately R15.00 for 1 Maltese Lire. The total population of Malta is estimated to be 357 000. Malti - a language akin to Arabic - is spoken by most inhabitants, but the Maltese are fluent in English as this is the language taught in schools. A large number of Maltese also speak Italian fluently, because of its close geographical position to Italy and because of its historical links with Italy (Berlitz, 1997: 8-10). The majority of Maltese adhere to the Roman Catholic faith. Beautifully decorated churches can be visited throughout the islands of Malta and Gozo.

Unemployment is a problem in Malta and large numbers of young people need to find jobs in other countries, especially in Australia, the USA and in Canada. The economic activities of Malta revolve around stone masonry and building, stone carving, producing silver filigree, blown and moulded glass, pottery, lace and crocheting. Farming, fishing, shiprepairing and light industrial activities are also conducted (Berlitz, 1997: 8-10).

Maltese history dates from prehistoric times with stone temples pre-dating the Egyptian pyramids, through ancient Roman, Greek and Arabic influences. The Crusaders, and especially the Knights of St John, enriched the history of this island. The Bible records that St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta, in the area of the current St Paul's Bay (Berlitz, 1997:12-14).

Malta is known as the place with the largest number of television antennas per capita in the world. Its inhabitants can receive television signals from all over the world because Malta lies on the North-South and East-West intersections of the globe. Malta also occupies a strategic position in the Mediterranean sea, providing an ideal stepping stone between Europe and Africa, and has been occupied by all major superpowers throughout its history. The hardships of Malta's people during World War II is well documented by Joseph Attard in *The battle of Malta: an epic true story of suffering and bravery*. Malta gained its independence from Britain during 1964. Malta proves to be a historical paradise to explore - the only regret being a lack of time to learn more about this fascinating place in the Mediterranean Sea. A fervent hope is fostered to revisit these three islands - with more time and money.

### References

- Berlitz Pocket Guides. 1997. Malta. 2nd ed. Princeton: Berlitz Publishing.
- Hattard, J. 1994. *The battle of Malta: an epic true story of suffering and bravery*. Valletta (Malta): Progress Press.