

The World Health Organization has estimated that 10 percent of the world's population has a disability. This amounts to about 15 million people in Bangladesh, a developing country with an emerging health field. As yet we have no qualified Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) in Bangladesh.

My name is Sharif-Al-Mamun and I am in my final year of the B.Sc. Speech & Language Therapy program at the Bangladesh Health Professions Institute, the academic institute of the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP). The duration of the program is five years, including a one year internship. I will graduate in December 2008, with the first graduating class of the program.

This summer, I travelled to Canada where I was very pleased to receive the Shirley McNaughton Award for Exemplary Communication at the 13th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC), on August 7th 2008 in Montreal. This award was presented to me in recognition of my performance in my current studies, and provided me with travel assistance, accommodation, as well as a two-week internship program relating to Blissymbolics.

ISAAC which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year is an international organisation which works to improve the life of individuals with communication difficulties through the promotion of AAC. The conference this summer had approximately 1300 attendees from 58 countries. Although it is expensive and demanding to travel overseas, many wheelchair and AAC users were present. I was the only member from Bangladesh and participated on the international Blissymbolics panel which was responsible for developing about 300 culturally diverse Bliss symbols.

The event hosted presentations on a wide variety of topics and many discussed high technology devices, some of which were very new to me. The cosmopolitan nature of the conference made it an ideal environment to share ideas and knowledge *which differ* between different parts of the world.

I also spent one week with Shirley McNaughton visiting organizations, hospitals and individuals with communication difficulties in South Western Ontario. During this time I had interesting conversations with SLTs, AAC organization staff, and AAC users. After finishing my Blissymbolics training I went to Kingston, Ontario to visit one of my former teachers, Gordon Skinner. He arranged some observations in video-fluoroscopic swallowing assessments, Laryngectomy, paediatric dyspraxia and alternative communication.

The culture in Canada is very different from Bangladeshi culture. In Canada both men and women drive buses, ride bicycles, jog on the street and smoke. In Bangladesh, these things are not allowed. Canada also has many streets and most automobile drivers obey the traffic lights and other rules. There is little traffic and horns are rarely used. In

Bangladesh the streets are crowded, traffic jams are the norm, air pollution is thick and the sound of horns is never ending.

The national dress for men in Bangladesh is the lungi and the panjabi. Women wear saris or salwar kameez, a long shirt and pants, with a scarf. In Canada people dress in the way they like, and the clothing worn depends on the activity or type of work being performed.

Food is also very different from Bangladesh. The main staples of Bangladesh are rice, dal and fish. Bangladeshis eat with their hands. In Canada, salad and chicken are eaten often and Canadians eat with a knife and fork.

My visit to Canada was extremely enjoyable. The country is beautiful and the people are very generous. I lived with three Canadian families and they all made me feel like part of their family. My experience in Canada has inspired me to further my education abroad, and I intend to seek a scholarship and acceptance into a postgraduate course.

CRP is a renowned non-governmental organization and many volunteers come from overseas to work at the centre. As there are no qualified SLTs in our country, we rely on foreign volunteers to teach and carry out some clinical work. Anyone interested in volunteering can find more information on the website: <http://www.crp-bangladesh.org/> or by e-mailing me at: sharif_slt_crp@yahoo.com



1) Sharif with his award at ISAAC conference, Montreal;



2) Sharif with Shirley McNaughton (Founder president of ISAAC)



3) Sharif with some AAC users