

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HOW DO PEOPLE REACT TO A NGO WEBSITE?

Sir,

The Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), India, founded in 1984 is a non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary organisation in Chennai committed to research in mental health and rehabilitation of the chronic mentally ill and disabled. SCARF runs a day care programme in the city and two residential rehabilitation centres outside the city with a total strength of over 100. SCARF is a designated WHO Collaborating Centre for Mental Health Research and Training.

In 1997, one of our friends put up a website for SCARF detailing all our activities. Some time later, he included a discussion board on the site inviting people to put in their comments and ideas. In 1999, coinciding with our 15th anniversary, we uploaded another site on SCARF. This paper describes the response we had from people who visited these two sites over a period of two years.

In a period of 24 months, we received 123 messages from all over the world. These largely pertained to the following issues :

In rank order they are :

- * Information about the illness
- * Current medication for schizophrenia; and

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availability of newer drugs

- * Recent research advances on schizophrenia
- * Request for admission in the residential centres of SCARF
- * General advice on management of a schizophrenic family member/friend
- * Results of research conducted by SCARF and a request for our publications
- * Enquiries about the availability of similar facilities in other parts of India, especially Bombay and Delhi.
- * Availability of placements at SCARF
- * Invitation for collaboration
- * Offer of help, donations to SCARF
- * Opportunities for training at SCARF
- * General mental health data from India
- * Expression of appreciation of SCARF's work
- * Details of mental health legislation

Of the 123 messages, 67 were from outside the country. The maximum number was from the United States, largely from the student community and some researchers. There were also queries from UK, Scandinavia, Germany, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Bangla Desh and Gulf Countries. Mailers from outside India were largely information seekers about the illness, its management, data from India. During a two-year period, we had 4 students of psychology work at SCARF for periods ranging from 2-5 months. They were drawn from the US, UK and Sweden.

People from India were largely concerned about the ill family members treatment and wanted information on the availability of facilities like SCARF in other parts of the country. Thanks to this facility, more than 10 patients from different parts of the country, especially Maharashtra have been admitted in our residential centres.

Some of the more interesting issues exchanged were :

- * Cosmic Beam Therapy in mental illness.
- * Nutritional treatment methods for schizophrenia.
- * There was a psychologist in the US who wanted to research the impact of animals on schizophrenia.

- * There was another from Canada "who wanted to co-author scholarly communication" with us.
- * Another suggestion was to "check out anti-psychiatry websites for an intelligent, alternative, client-centered view of therapy and main stream treatment".

On the whole, this has been a very interesting and useful activity of SCARF and what I feel is a very good supplement to our regular work. This has clearly highlighted the need for rehabilitation centres in various parts of the country, especially in the major urban centres. There is a genuine, felt need by the families of the severely disabled and I believe fellow mental health professionals must seriously contemplate about this. I would urge all mental health facilities to have their own websites, since with the explosion of information technology in this country, this will help us reach out to a wider population. It also serves to put India on the world map in the field of mental health.

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