

LOW VISION ADVENTURES in ISRAEL

In September Naomi Meltzer, recipient of the Valda Knight Memorial Scholarship awarded by the NZ branch of Hadassah International to assist a NZ medical professional to study their particular area of interest at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, set out to study low vision services in Israel. Here she shares some of her experiences:

Coming from NZ to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem in September last year, I imagined armed guards at every entrance searching bags, checking ID, questioning me....The security was a non-event, finding the entrance was. When you are looking for the second floor, Main Building and the bus drops you at a point where there is no clearly defined gate let alone main building, this presents quite a challenge. Hadassah Hospital is a huge campus on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

The Michaelson Institute is essentially a hospital based multi-disciplinary low vision clinic. It is staffed by Ophthalmologists, Low Vision Optometrists, a social worker, a genetic counsellor and a very experienced rehabilitation instructor. Hadassah is a teaching hospital and all medical students, particularly Ophthalmology registrars attend a lecture on low vision as part of their course. The clinics are conducted in a mixture of Hebrew, Arabic and English. Fortunately instead of letter charts they use number charts and I was able to learn my numbers in Hebrew very quickly this way.



Spot the English – Optometrist written in Hebrew, Arabic and.....English?

Israel, though not a wealthy country, has a social welfare scheme for people with low vision and blindness which is based on need, both visual and financial. Those with very severe loss (less than 6/120) receive a social welfare benefit much like our Disability Benefit. However those with low vision between 6/12 and 6/120 or less than 20 degrees visual fields including homonymous hemianopia, receive a means tested subsidy from the government which pays for between 50% and 90% of consulting fees and cost of low vision devices, depending on their income.

The Israeli technology that I was keen to find out more about is the Orcam glasses for those with really significant loss of vision. This is a head mounted device which is worn with a transmitter strapped to a belt or carried in a bag and a small attachment worn on a finger. The device recognises objects through a smart camera and speaks through a mini earpiece. It is activated by pointing at a text/product or by pushing a button while looking at the text/product/face direction. These two options ensures that even a blind person will be able to operate it - that is according to the sales team, although they add that it is not suitable for everyone and requires training. They also concede that the better the vision the easier it is to learn to use it, which correlates with the advice of colleagues at Hadassah, who pointed out that if you have sufficient vision to use it you would usually use other cheaper and more readily available technology.



A private Low Vision Clinic for families with very low income.

While in Israel, I also visited other Low Vision clinics. I was introduced to some new lens technology which is designed specifically for people with macula degeneration, but is suitable for other low vision situations as well. I hope to have that available here shortly.

For reading and other near tasks there is a special type of magnifying spectacle which incorporates three LED lights beautifully aligned with the point of focus – these come in a range of magnifications and are supplied with a charger on USB. For distance there are spectacles lenses which give a small amount of magnification and a tinted filter to enhance contrast. Another advance is a spectacle prescription lens which shifts the image to a better seeing point on the retina.

I was hoping to find a centre for rehabilitation of stroke and traumatic brain injury victims at Hadassah. Unfortunately, despite my research on the internet indicating such a centre exists, in reality this turned out to be a small research team in the neuro-ophthalmology department.

However, I finally managed to meet up briefly with the one person who seemed to know the most about visual rehabilitation. This Optometrist takes some clients privately for rehabilitation, while also doing a PhD in Posterior Cortical Atrophy. PCA is a very interesting type of Alzheimer's disease which strikes at an earlier age (about 50-60 years old) and affects a person's ability to read because the part of the brain which is responsible for reading – not just seeing, is affected first. People in the early stage often do the rounds of Optometrists and Ophthalmologists complaining they can't read, and are told there is nothing wrong with the health of their eyes or with their vision, which indeed is quite normal when tested on a (high contrast) distance single letter chart. In my limited experience (n=2) of this condition, maximal enhancement of contrast can be of great assistance in the early stages when the patient is still has the cognitive ability to read but is struggling.

Overall, the experience of living and working in such a different environment was wonderful and confirmed for me that there is always something new or different to be absorbed particularly in low vision where so much relies on observation of and communication with the client, whatever their age.



Three of the twelve Chagall stained glass windows situated at Hadassah Hospital.