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Hands-on treatment, a world away



In July, a team from Northeastern University's physical-therapy program worked with young patients in China who had suffered severe burns.

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The miles proved no impediment. The borders didn't get in the way.

In July, a team from Northeastern University's **physical-therapy** program spent two weeks in Changsha and Beijing, China, working with young patients who had suffered severe burns.

Lorna Hayward, associate professor in physical therapy; clinical professor Ann Charrette; and graduate student Li Li performed physical evaluations and treatments, administered play therapy and taught proper scar-management techniques at the JianShe and Air Force General hospitals.

Northeastern and HandReach, an international network of medical professionals and volunteers that provides poor children with quality health care, co-sponsored the trip.

"Doing this type of work has become my internal fabric," says Hayward, who takes groups of physical-therapy students to orphanages in Quito, Ecuador, each spring as part of an experiential-learning opportunity.

Children compose between 50 to 60 percent of China's 10 million burn victims, making rehabilitation services for kids a top priority there. Hayward says she hopes to make therapy that addresses pain through play a main component of treatment for patients and their families who aren't able to afford medication.

Finding ways to deal with pain without medication appears to be a long-term struggle that Chinese doctors, patients and families must be prepared to accept, says Li. "Having kids play with toys, interact with music or alleviate their pain in other ways is something we still need to work on," she says.

In Beijing, a group of therapeutic drummers and musicians from the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C., played instruments with the kids.

"It's a way for kids to have fun while processing grief and dealing with the pain," said Hayward, who notes the need for patients "to get up and moving immediately" after surgical procedures.

Li, who also served as a translator, was particularly fond of a shy little girl who liked to hide. Eventually, she convinced the youngster to join her peers, who raced around obstacle courses, danced and played outside.

"It's very touching and rewarding to work with these kids," says Li, whose long-range professional goals include reforming the field of physical therapy in China, where hospitals regularly employ 16-year-old nurses who have just one year of clinical experience.

Hayward hopes Northeastern can build a lasting partnership with the Air Force General Hospital, which would serve as a permanent co-op site for generations of physical therapy and nursing students.

"We need to blend the two worlds together in a way that lets good technique and sensitivity to cultural practices remain intact," she says. "It would be a life-changing experience for any student who works there."

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