

A Day in My Week at Crisis:

Christmas Eve

This was to be my longest day, starting at 9am and working all the way through until 9pm. From 9am until 2pm I was receptionist and dispenser for a colleague. We had a shortage of support staff, and so optometrists help each other. Then from 2pm until 9pm I was to be carrying out the eye examinations. I enjoyed both roles. Being on reception allowed me time to talk to the homeless guests as they waited to be seen. They were very keen to talk about their lives, families, hopes and dreams. I found myself humbled to meet such intelligent people. Just being there for them helps to re-build their self-respect, to feel that they are worth it, and that there are people who care about them.

The equipment we have at the Open Christmas is better than some practices I have worked in over the years. We had a 6-meter room with a test chart box, donated by Spec of Kensington after we went computerised. We also had instruments for checking eye pressure and for peripheral visual field screening. I also managed to get hold of a hand held slit-lamp microscope. The only thing I really missed was an adjustable height chair for the guest to sit in, so if anybody could help us out with one next year my back and I would be very grateful.

Dispensing was relatively easy, as there was little choice to baffle people. We had a range of ready-made glasses from +1.00 up to +4.00, so that we could try and issue as many as we could at the time of the test. It was very rewarding to see the response of people coming along with newspapers or books that they couldn't read, and going away to enjoy hours of comfortable reading. For the more complex prescriptions that needed dispensing, we had a very simple collection of frames, a choice of two for women and four for men. We had an optical laboratory opening on the 27th December to carry out the work. They have thankfully been helping the Crisis Open Christmas with prescription work for years now.

As lunchtime drew on, my eyes started to water. Our room backed onto the kitchen, and lunch today obviously involved onions – lots of onions when catering for the hundreds of guests and volunteers. The volunteers wait until all the guests have been served before they get their lunch. It was worth the wait; today there was a lovely vegetarian lasagne.

Early in the afternoon I met Mary, one of the guests. She was a 38-year-old artist who was struggling with her painting since her glasses were stolen. I found her to have 4 dioptres of hypermetropia and issued her with a pair of ready-made reading glasses from stock. She was over the moon with her vision being restored to normal. I promised to go over to the art area later to see some of her work. About 2 hours later, on emerging from my room, I was greeted with a big hug and presented with a picture that Mary had painted for me. I was overwhelmed. The picture now hangs on my wall at home.

Late in the afternoon a volunteer named Patrick turned up after having got something caught in his eye. He had been helping sort through the clothing when a fibre of material

had blow into his eye. Luckily I was able to remove the fibre easily, and using the hand held slit-lamp, I could reassure him that there was no abrasion.

The other bonus to carrying out eye examinations at the Crisis Open Christmas was that we were located in the medical centre. So when I saw Larry and suspected he had high blood pressure, I was able to take him straight into see a nurse called Mary who triaged him before he was seen by one of the doctors. It all works very efficiently, no letters being posted off and getting lost. You can get immediate feedback as to the outcome of your referral.

Towards the end of the day I was starting to wilt. I had a break with a cup of tea. Tony, a chap I had seen earlier in the day, arrived back holding his guitar. He sat down and started to sing, "Have yourself a merry little Christmas." He had the most amazing voice, which almost brought a tear to my eye. I have never been serenaded in practice before, and doubt I ever will again.