**Owen’s story**

The scope of Occupational Therapy (OT) is limitless; it reaches a wide section of people (OT provides help to persons of all ages, some with physical/ mental illness, some with disabilities, as well as many people living their lives with long term conditions, or just simply those experiencing the effects of ageing), by enabling them to do the things they need or want to do by themselves, therefore giving them a sense of empowerment in a world that might often put limits on their capabilities. With this said, I was lucky to witness one of those cases that demonstrated the limitlessness of OT, when I met a boy named Owen (pseudo name) during one of my university placements in a children’s hospital in the UK.

Owen is an eight year old boy living with his parents and four other siblings in a gypsy community; the family sleeps in a caravan and have a small space nearby that was built as a ‘day room’ where they live (schooling is provided for the children by the gypsy community which was stationed a few metres away from Owen’s caravan).

When I first met this little boy, he spoke of his dream to be in the army; once an active child, he loved shooting, boxing, and riding his bike. Sadly, this was also the point in which he had been diagnosed with Takayasu’s Arteritis, and; in turn, the time in which a small boys hope for the future seemed to fade away as he was no longer able to do any of the things he loved.

Takayasu’s Arteritis (TA) is the inflammation of the walls of large arteries (aorta - largest artery in the body stemming from the heart to the abdomen and its main branches). These arteries supply blood to the head, arms, legs and internal organs. TA causes vessel walls to thicken which narrows the inside of the artery, and therefore reduces blood flow and oxygen to the body parts/organs that the arteries supply. Symptoms include pain in arms and legs, dizziness, headaches, weakness/ fatigue, high blood pressure, chest pain and risk of heart attack, stroke and also aneurysms. There is no known cause for TA which affects 1 - 2 people per million worldwide, often appearing in persons 15 - 40 years of age, the majority being female, so to say that the occurrence of TA in Owen is rare, would be an understatement.

The main treatment for TA is steroids, and this form of medication was no different for Owen (the treatments first administered to the child, made him very hyperactive, aggressive, and highly energetic. These elevated levels of energy were soon followed by low moods and decreased motivation to do anything, as well as the return of all symptoms within a few days (pain, fever, fatigue, sweats, and headaches).

So began the forte nightly cycle for Owen and his family.

Owen had been treated with such large amounts of steroids, on such a regular basis that he had gained a massive amount of weight, so much so; he was unable to reach his toes to wash them or tie his shoes (if he could find a pair of shoes to fit his swollen feet). In fact, many of the daily functions we take for granted and perform with ease, were no longer possible for Owen. His mother, a young gypsy woman with little education, and absolutely no training, was forced (by necessity) into the role of becoming a home nurse for Owen, and as such, she was the sole carer for her suffering child. This meant having to do everything for him; she would lift him in/ out of the bath/ bed/ caravan, dress him, and perform tasks that most eight year olds can do quite well by themselves. So fatigued and exhausted from just putting on his own clothes, Owen could barely walk the short distance of a few metres to school. Given this, along with the initial treatments, and all of the health risks he faced, Owens parents were instructed by his doctors to keep his blood pressure and activity levels low, which subsequently lead to a reduced his level of tolerance for any form of activity and a further inability to perform even the most basic of tasks.

**So how did Occupational Therapy help Owen?**

The Occupational Therapist and myself worked with Owen and his family to encourage him to constantly push himself to do small tasks independently, thereby building up his tolerance for activity (since his inactivity led to such de-conditioning). Once Owens steroid levels were somewhat maintained, we adapted his activities, and; using various forms of equipment, we broke these activities down into smaller/ manageable tasks to make it easier for him to achieve little goals of accomplishment.

Along with a number of modifications made to the life of Owen and his family, the following is a simple illustration of how OT can be used to enhance the daily life of a person.

In order to take a bath without help, Owen was given a board to fit the width of the bathtub, this meant that he could slide onto the board and lower himself down into the tub (a task previously aided by his mother). He was then bought a wooden long handled sponge which could reach his legs, and therefore enabled him to wash himself independently. By performing and accomplishing just the smallest of achievable tasks, the patient is granted freedom, which builds positivity and self-esteem, boosting moral, and leading to a more motivated individual who is willing to create bigger goals towards living independently again. Independence for the patient also helps their family, because the constant pressure of caring for someone day in and day out can be so overwhelming, by giving their family member even the smallest amount of ability to do things for themselves, the burden of caring for an invalid/ challenged person is lifted however slightly (even if the career gets just an extra ten minutes a day to themselves, it can help to revitalize what can be an ongoing and stressful situation).

Note: Occupational Therapists can provide a wide variety of adaptive equipment to make almost any activity easier for people, regardless of their physical or mental condition.

Along with the individual’s physical needs, when you work with a patient as an Occupational Therapist, not only do you aid with the restructuring of their individual lives, you also view the case holistically, and; as such, this often includes their environment/ surroundings. With this in mind, Occupational Therapists collaborate with the appropriate individuals to build structures (where needed) that make mobility and accessibility easier for people (this can be done by means of measuring areas to provide the necessary information for the contractors/ builders).

In Owens case, we measured the dimensions of a slope between his day house and caravan to build stairs (because the large slope was too dangerous/ difficult for him to walk up/ down especially during winter). We also measured for steps into his caravan, because he previously struggled to lift his leg high enough to access it, and was forced to climb on to his hands and knees to get inside. Again, simple but effective steps in helping people gain the power they need to lead productive and fulfilled lives.

Again, the reach of OT to help individuals that desire to perform many of the daily chores we take for granted in our so called normal lives, is tremendous. Occupational Therapists have the skills to help people go from dependant and demoralised men/ woman and children, to that of persons who can really participate effectively and in and around the world that surrounds them.

In summary, due to my programme scheduling; my time working with Owen was unfortunately limited, so I can’t report on his current well-being, but what I can comment on is this. As Owen grows up, based on the available data of his disease, and his prognosis while being somewhat uncertain; Owen will not require a diminished need for ongoing OT support. Indeed, as he grows into adolescence, the requirements for personal care, leisure, and school activities will develop, and the importance of having an Occupational Therapist in his future to provide him with encouragement and motivation cannot be understated. The Occupational Therapist will play a major part in the continuing/ setting of bigger goals/ meaningful activity, and will aid in the development and sustainability of the overall well-being of Owen, giving him the skill set to live the independent life he chooses, which one simply can’t put a price on.