

Liz Carrington—the eight interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Liz was introduced by my seventh interviewee, [Helen Jackson](#) who talked so movingly of her time working in a Romanian orphanage after the fall of the Ceausescu regime. She said: ‘Liz is a physiotherapist and friend of my Mum. Through her work in India she inspired me to look at volunteering myself and that’s how I found myself in Romania.’

I met up with Liz at a cafe in York. She told me about the strange coincidences that led to her work in India, her life in international physiotherapy, and the busy time she’s been having since retiring from her profession.

How did you get into physiotherapy, Liz?

I wanted to be a physiotherapist from when I was thirteen. I don’t know where it came from really. I just wanted to do it and I’ve absolutely loved it. It’s been the most wonderful career and it’s taken me to many countries.

My first taste of international work was in 1973 when I won a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship. This was set up when Winston Churchill died and is a marvellous opportunity for people from all backgrounds, to travel and to find out about a particular subject and share their knowledge. I wanted to look at new techniques for treating children with neurological conditions, particularly cerebral palsy, and I had a month each in Hungary, Switzerland and Italy. Hungary was particularly interesting because it was in the middle of the Cold War. I tried to make personal contacts before I went so that people would trust me and I found a lovely man to teach me some Hungarian. He had left Hungary in 1956 and was working as a book illustrator at York University. He cried because he was so delighted that someone wanted to learn his language.

When I got to Hungary I found that people wanted to talk. Sometimes I’d be sitting on a bus next to someone and as we went into a tunnel and there was a lot of noise they’d start whispering in my ear—things that they didn’t want to be overheard; criticisms about the system. And one day I dropped a book in the park and an elderly lady picked it up. “Are you English?” she said and then she took me round to various places. One was a radio station in the hills above Budapest. It was manned by Russian guards with huge Alsatian dogs patrolling the perimeter and she started shouting all sorts of anti-Russian things. She was delighted to practise her English and was afraid of nothing. She turned round from shouting at the Russians and said, “My dear, do you have good bread in England?” Given the shortages they had to endure, that was quite poignant.

I focused on Conductive Education while I was in Hungary. This aims to give neurologically impaired children as much independence as possible without resource to special equipment and aids. It brings together education, psychology and therapy approaches to unlock potential. Sometimes the criticism has been that they had to use that system because they didn’t *have* resources. Also that there was absolutely nothing before and the children stayed in bed for months. Those things are probably true, but nonetheless I saw children making enormous progress. There was something magical there about the holistic approach they used and the way that they did things like linking movement to language.

Then I had a month in Bern, Switzerland and that was very different. Physiotherapists using the Bobath approach were treating children who were born with an identifiable neurological problem and that was almost ten per cent of the neonatal population. They believed that if you started really early you could make a huge difference. But that level of care is not sustainable in most countries and I think they were promising more than they could achieve. Nonetheless, I learned a huge amount. Today, it's evidence based practice that's the thing.

I was given £1,012 for my travel fellowship. It was a lot of money in those days and it took the whole of my lunch hour to sign for it at the bank. I didn't spend it all and so when I came home, I sent two hundred pounds back. The secretary was lovely and said, "Oh dear! Have you been eating enough?"

My travel fellowship started me off on an international path and it just grew. I never really set out to do that.

So what happened next?

I worked at the hospital here in York for twenty wonderful years—everyone in the team was doing something at national level so it was very vibrant. We started getting visitors coming to look at our work and as the international interest grew I began to feel restless. Then a friend invited me to go on holiday to India where he'd lived for a year as one of the Brothers of Charity. He said, "I'd like to take you back to where I used to live, and show you India. Would you like to come?" I thought, "No, I *wouldn't*, what a terrifying idea"—and so I said "OK!"

That was in 1985 and I just knew there would be more to it than a holiday. I

couldn't sleep the night before we flew—my mouth was dry and my heart was pounding. Anyway, we arrived in Calcutta in the middle of the monsoon at midnight. People were bustling and shouting and pulling at my suitcase. They were all telling me to get into their cars which probably weren't even proper taxis. It was such an assault on the senses. Even now that I've been back many times, I still find it's like that.



We went and spent about a week at the Home for the Dying. I'd love to have met Mother Theresa but she was in Ethiopia at the time. One of the things I will never forget was watching a young Japanese girl. She was only about eighteen and was sitting with a lady who was dying. They had no shared language, and anyway the lady was too ill to say much. But somehow the girl communicated and looked after her. She was so observant and responsive—she loved her to the end and it was beautiful. She seemed to epitomise what the place was about. She's wasn't very old but she just *got* it. I found that deeply moving.

From there we went on to Delhi. I'd noticed a job offer in our physiotherapy journal but I didn't take the details with me because I wasn't thinking it would be relevant to me. And then my friend said, "Why don't you go and see them?" and I said, "I don't know where they are—I don't have the address," thinking to myself, "I'm off the hook." But what happened next was very surprising. We were sitting in a taxi doing some sightseeing when a van stopped next to us. On the side it said 'Spastics Society of Northern India' with the address and everything I needed to know, though

thankfully the name has changed now. So I took it as a sign—I went along and spoke to the receptionist and she said, “We’re very busy today and can’t see anybody.” So I thought, “Oh good, I’m off the hook again.” But then to my horror as I was walking out, I heard footsteps behind me and someone said, “Did you say you’re British?” I said, “Yes” and she said, “The director will see you.”

So I went in to see the director of the centre and it was extraordinary. She said, “We haven’t had anyone respond to this advert and I’ve just been praying that someone would walk in off the street.” I thought, “Oh my goodness me, I don’t think I’m off the hook at all.” And when she said, “I think you’ll fit in quite well here,” I felt a mixture of relief and dread. For the past two years I’d been giving up lots of things that I did in my spare time but without knowing why. And as a person of faith I saw it as God needing to dig me up because York had become a bit of a tap root. It took a year to sort out the bureaucracy and funding but when I went back to India, I stayed for three years and have continued to visit since.

How did it work out?

Seeing so much poverty was a challenge. I think that’s why I felt so ambivalent about going to India in the first place—it’s such a spectrum. You do what you can but the problems are so enormous that they can drag you down. Some years later, I remember being asked to go and visit a family in a village in Andhra Pradesh. I went with two colleagues and we got there quite late in the evening. It was dark and we bent low to get into the family’s hut which was very basic. There was one light bulb swinging from the ceiling and we saw a young boy who had clearly got muscular dystrophy. His father was very anxious and was desperate to know what he could do for him. We asked if he had any other children and he said that he had another two. They were outside and when we looked, we could see that they were in the earlier stages of the disease—one of them was not able to run and the other was just sitting on the floor, very still. I shall never forget those three children, and the father wanting us to help. There were no resources and all we could tell him was to try as far as possible to give his children the same experiences as other children in the village. And to love them. My colleagues and I went back to the car and cried.



You can’t *solve* that problem here, either, but you can make the journey from disability to the end of life, much better. And even in limited circumstances small things can make a difference. I remember a young boy of about fourteen who came to the Delhi centre with his family. He had muscular dystrophy, too, and couldn’t move much. He’d been lying flat on the floor and was terrified of drowning when he had a drink. So we propped him up on a bean bag and gave him a straw. It was such a simple thing

but he was so relieved.

It takes time to train physios, and sometimes you simply need more pairs of hands. So we tried to make it easier for people to become competent. I worked closely with a very skilled Indian occupational therapist who became a good friend. We found people who were interested in working with disabled children and then we taught them everything we knew about paediatrics. In some cases, they actually ended up knowing more about children with disabilities than the people who had been through university. Such a great group of people—some of them went off and set up

charities of their own and I'm so proud of them. That wouldn't have happened so quickly if we'd gone down the regular route.

There have been massive changes since my first visit to India. Then, I'd be greeted at the local store by a man in a white coat who would say, "Good morning Madam," and write down what I bought in a ledger. It had a lovely Indian carpet on the floor. Now it's a supermarket selling ready meals.

Things are hugely more prosperous, but the problem is in making sure that development reaches the poorer sectors of society.

And what else did you do?

After my time in India, I spent four years as a consultant physiotherapist working in a number of countries including Mauritius, Vietnam, Yemen, Kenya and Zambia. Then I became the international development adviser to the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) and that meant I could help other people who were wanting to go and work abroad, like me.

I also became so interested in trying to understand other cultures that I did a degree in anthropology. It was good but I felt like I asked more and more questions and got fewer and fewer answers.



Then I did some work in the EU with physiotherapy colleagues from several member countries. It was about checking up on EU health legislation to see how it would affect the profession and also promoting the professional standards set by the World Confederation for Physical Therapy. We sometimes went to speak to health ministers and said, "This is the standard that we're working to in Europe. How do you think you could help promote this? For example, we had a twinning partnership with the Czech physio

association. I believe in collaboration and sensible communication. Tremendous good has been done in Brussels so I'm finding the present Brexit situation a bit difficult.

In 2010, the year I retired, I got an award from the World Confederation for Physical Therapy. It was for international practice and such an honour to get that from my colleagues. That was wonderful!

And what are you doing now that you've retired from physiotherapy?

I was ordained into the Church of England in 2009 and don't feel called to the priesthood but I do feel called to being out in the community. So I'm a vocational deacon. As well as being involved in all the usual church things like children's work and preaching, I'm chaplain to the businesses in our parish, and I'm part of the chaplaincy team at York Racecourse. I also do Street Angels which is run by a group of churches in York. We help people who've been out partying—they're quite vulnerable if they've over indulged. There are often young girls who find their shoes a bit of a challenge, so we give out water and flip flops and make sure they get home safely—I meet all sorts of people doing that and enjoy it a lot.

And I've just come back from a three-month sabbatical. I decided to make a list of people that I love and I came up with forty-three. I didn't manage to get round them all but I did quite well. I ended up visiting Holland, Scotland, Germany and Estonia. It did make me feel really refreshed and I think sometimes when you're busy and doing a lot of things you can forget about yourself. So that was a good reminder that I need to factor in a bit more time for me. Other people have been telling me that for quite a while.

And who have you chosen to be the next link in the chain, Liz?

I have chosen my friend, Gareth Wardell. It was his invitation to India on holiday that was the start of amazing things for me. He is now a vicar in Greater London and is pretty much the most inspirational person I know.



Photo: Peter Bayliss