

A Medical Mission in Kampuchea

There have been quite a few Medical missions to Kampuchea, and we went on one in August 2006. It was organized by the Health Christian Fellowship Malaysia in conjunction with World Vision, and 5 Doctors, one of whom is a Paediatrician flew over by Air Asia to Pnom Penh to accomplish this mission. The medicine was supplied from donations in Penang, and we each paid for our own airfare, accommodation and the living expenses of the Medical and Dental Kampuchean students who were to act as our interpreters.

We landed in the Kampuchean capital, in an airport built by Malaysians, and were driven to our Spartan local hotel where we had our first taste of Kampuchean food. It was edible, and not as exotic as the roasted spiders we were to sample later on. (Fig.1 & 2)





The next few days we were driven by bus to Kampung Cham, the worst hit of the “Killing Fields” villages. It was a Muslim community, and yet they came in the droves to seek medical treatment from us Christian Doctors. (Fig.3)



We worked in the most primitive conditions, and when we began, even the roof fell down on us, raining all the dirt from the attic. (Fig 4)



We did our best, seeing mostly coughs and colds and psychosomatic conditions, (Fig5)



but we managed to see a rare case of Wilson's disease, complete with the Kayser Fleischer rings (Fig 6).. Altogether the 5 of us saw more than 1,500 patients in the 4 days we ministered to them. We even managed to detect a case of Hypertensive Encephalopathy with a BP of 230/120 who said she felt a funny tingling sensation in her tongue; she was immediately rested & rushed to the hospital. There were also many cases of thyrotoxicosis who presented with just anxiety, & would have been dismissed with prayers if we had not pursued in asking them if they could hold a cup & saucer, & noticed bulging eyes with a slight swelling in their necks- a high index of suspicion certainly paid off here. We were also mindful of local sensitivities, and referred all cases of female breast lumps to our female colleague; it was better to be perceived ignorant than to be accused of inappropriate behaviour. And so a few cases of fibroadenoma & breast abscess were seen.



The Kampuchean referral Hospital is among the most primitive and filthiest we have ever seen, and we wonder how patients can survive if they ever get admitted: (Fig 7)



There was no time for sightseeing, and we sampled local customs such as resting on a swinging hammock after a meal of lean Kampuchean beef & kampong chicken, all starved to the very bone. Curiously the water buffaloes were well fed because they had a double food supply of water weeds and grass, whereas the cows only had access to the sparse vegetation above water, and were like the cows that suffered from 7 years of famine in the biblical tale of Joseph & the Pharaoh's dream. (Fig 8)



On the last day of the mission the Kampung Cham villagers showed their appreciation by throwing a lunch for us, and we were entertained to Kampuchean songs accompanied by the musicians dressed in full court regalia (Fig 9):



The only tourist attraction we visited in Pnom Penh was the infamous Toul Sreng prison where all the returning students had been incarcerated and tortured beyond imagination. Our local Doctor refused to revisit the prison because it reminded him of his visit during the horror years, when he saw the rotting and mutilated bodies strewn all over the prison (Fig 10):



It was a sobering experience, and we really count our blessings that we live in a peaceful and civilized country where the best medical care is accessible to everyone at an affordable cost. In the referral hospital, these poor peasants had to pay US2 per stay, which is perhaps comparable to the US6 per visit that Vietnamese pay for treatment in the local Govt. hospital, but nothing compared to the RM1 or so or even free treatment we get with the best investigations back home. Perhaps this kind of elective posting should become part and parcel of every medical student's curriculum, to make him aware of his role in patient care.

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(745 words & 10 pictures)