

Notes From Abroad

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The Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE – Cambodia, Vietnam

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The Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE in Phnom Penh, the capital City of Cambodia, opened its doors in December 1996 as the result of a collaborative effort between Worldmate, Japan Relief for Cambodia, and HOPE worldwide. Its mission is to provide a center for the training of medical professionals, while delivering 24-hour high quality, free medical care for the poor and needy of Cambodia. The Cambodian doctors would rotate through each of the various departments to get exposure for their own clinical training, and the US/UK trained physicians were responsible for providing them the training that they so desperately desired. It was because of these greatly needed and highly compelling values held by this phenomenal institution that I chose to work here for four weeks.

The hospital is a 22 in patient bed facility: eleven beds each for medical patients and for surgical patients. It is run by overseas trained physicians, mainly from the USA or UK, who spend at least two years in Phnom Penh, performing a combination of supervision and management roles for the hospital, with the day to day medical decisions being left to the Cambodian staff. In addition, there was a medical and separate surgical outpatient clinic, where patients would be seen and followed for

non-acute illnesses: follow up for diabetes or hypertension, and routine preventative health care measures. There was also a separate HIV clinic in another part of town as well as a hospice for patients dying of HIV.



Patients wait outside ER

The ER Elective

I remember my first day in the ER. Over 200 patients were waiting outside since the early hours of the morning, patiently waiting outside the hospital would have a number stamped on their hand. A "lottery" would occur; those fortunate patients whose number was called out were allowed into the ER, and the remaining 100 or so patients were told to go home and to return the following day. I was seeing a patient who was fortunate enough to have her number called out. However, the fortuitous nature of her

situation was debatable. She had come daily for seven months to be seen in the ER, with great hope that this great institution would cure her of her disabling condition that had afflicted her for so long. Her presenting complaint was polyarthralgia, inability to walk for four months and dysphagia. Her diagnosis was Scleroderma. Her treatment was nothing!!! With a heavy heart, I reluctantly told her that her disease was incurable and progressive. The hope that she had been holding onto for seven whole months was taken away by me within minutes. Her husband wheeled her away humbly and grateful for my time. This was just a taste of my months experience in Cambodia.

The joy and laughter from this experience came from treating those patients who arrived with a life threatening illness, and left the hospital cured and healthy. Most of these cases were severe pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria, and trauma cases. The Cambodian doctors were extremely well equipped to deal with these common conditions. Their clinical skills and experience provided them with excellent diagnostic tools and antibiotics were

readily available. The rewards from this kind of work come from the realization that we can save lives and make a difference when left with very limited resources.

I would thoroughly recommend anyone to go to Sihanouk Hospital for an independent elective site to improve clinical skills, perform many procedures, and to experience how the majority of people on our planet live. You will be left to your devices to do as much or as little as you want. You will be provided as much help as you need with interpretation, performing procedures, managing patients. The Cambodian doctors are extremely bright and you will learn a lot from them. In addition, you also will have a lot to offer so go with the expectation that you are there to learn and teach!! You can work wherever you please, be it the ER, the medical ward, the HIV center or even surgery. For more information on this hospital, visit their website at: www.sihosp.org

Good luck and enjoy!!

Hue, Vietnam: A Mutual Learning Experience

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We arrived in Vietnam the weekend of January 21st, 2005: Bechien Wu, a third year internal medicine resident at Yale, and I, a second year family medicine resident from Tufts. The sweltering heat of Ho Chi Minh City (or Saigon) surprised me. My first weekend in Hue was spent exploring the city and finding my way to the hospital. Reading Vietnamese was easier than the pronunciation--there are six tones --so looking for the words "Binh Vien" (hospital) and "dai hoc" (university) were the best way to orient myself.

Monday morning I used the local form of transport: a 1970s rusty bicycle. A bit scary in the motorbike traffic, but fun, I made it to the hospital safely. Everyone was eager to try their English or French with us. We were given a tour of the university hospital by Dr. Thuy, the chief of Internal Medicine. There are only a few surnames in Vietnam, so the doctors are addressed as Dr. <first name> (I am "Dr. Rebecca"). The first day on rounds we saw a code which was announced by someone grabbing the attending by the arm and leading him to another room. There we found a recently examined patient: a 70-year-old man with COPD and status post MI, not breathing. Someone was performing chest compressions and someone else



Bechien Wu, Rebecca Seekamp

was starting an IV. However, no oxygen was administered for minutes and an airway was never secured. The patient didn't make it. We were frustrated in our helplessness as there were no bags or masks.

We fell into an established routine of attending morning report, rounding, and giving lectures to students and staff. On rounds, the chief of the department would give a brief history, ask us to examine the patient, and then ask "what do you think?" We quickly learned how much they valued what we said. If we recommended a beta blocker in a post MI patient, for example, they would write the order no sooner than it came out of our mouths. It felt exciting and was nice to feel useful. The Vietnam elective is one in which independence and teaching are key components.