

My trip to Cambodia

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During my 'get away from Med School' travels last November, I took a small detour into the world of voluntary medical care in Cambodia with Christchurch GP Dr Annie Chen-Green's One-2-One Charitable Trust. I had been to Cambodia before, but only for a few days to go to Siem Reap with my family so I did not know what to expect. This time Annie Chen-Green, Kath Burnell, another GP from Christchurch, Felicity Brown, a teacher from Melbourne, Nelly Kang, and I left for Cambodia. We had taken the bus from Ho Chi Minh City and arrived after dark in downtown Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, with all our possessions on our backs. When we descended from the bus we were confronted by around thirty tuk-tuk drivers shouting at us in Khmer to hire them for the journey. We were relieved to find a driver a few blocks away. When we finally arrived, we met up with our new family for the week; a group of dentists, doctors and an accountant.

Day one started ridiculously early. We all went to the Rainbow Bridge Orphanage to pick up the mobile medical and dental equipment. This stop was definitely a highlight as we got to spend a little time with some beautiful children there who just want to be loved and cared for. We had a helper in this department by the name of Drake, the rescued retriever; he would sit with more than twenty children grabbing onto any piece of him they could get a hold of as a source of comfort. Annie always says, 'it takes an orphan to know one.' These kids were all HIV orphans, many of whom also have HIV, and it was a privilege to hold them and smile with them, even if only for a moment. It was reassuring to know that all the children receive retroviral medication.

The next day, we piled everything onto the bus and set off for our four-day visit to one of Cambodia's twenty-six provincial prisons. The dentists spent the entire week cleaning, extracting and putting in fillings for guards and prisoners alike (all equally in need); while the all female medical team of three set up a small clinic with the aid of our suitcase of medical supplies. Paracetamol really is a wonder drug/placebo! We were fortunate to have Cambodian dental students to translate for us. This proved invaluable as we were faced with useless bureaucracy and corruption of the prison system throughout our stay. I learnt a lot about diplomacy and dealing with corrupt government officials from Dr Annie, and that confidence was an effective tool when utilised with humility.

We spent one morning de-worming the entire prison population and staff, and also treated many prisoners for scabies. On two occasions the medical



Felicity doing general medical check-ups in a prison in Takeo Province, Cambodia.

team travelled on the back of motos and tuk-tuks into the country side to hold village clinics. Tragically we saw people suffering from conditions that could be easily treated in NZ, but because of the lack of adequate and affordable medical services in Cambodia, they were unlikely to survive.

Our last morning was spent at one of the four huge prisons on the outskirts of Phnom Penh where corruption has been taken to a whole new level. We were told that prisoners have to bribe their guards to spend time outside their cells and, disturbingly, even to see us. The food and medicines the prisoners' families brought in for them were often confiscated by the guards, who took it for themselves. Because of the large size of the prisons we had the chance to talk to quite a few foreign prisoners, while treating them, to gain an insight into real prison life.

Throughout the week, the patients we saw had a wide range of complaints but most were the results of chronic malnutrition, hard work, and worrying about survival. Heart murmurs were abundant, mainly due to childhood rheumatic fever, and constipation was a major problem due to poor, low fibre diets. There were a few chronic terminal conditions and some heart breaking situations where we wished we could have done more.

Reassurance, empathy, our limited medical supplies, and a few public health ideas, such as eating sugar cane as a natural laxative, were the most effective treatments we had. I learned a lot about humanity and that our needs as human beings are the same. Health and wellbeing can never be separated from having our basic needs met. My heart was repeatedly broken by my inability to cure things that could be fixed in the developed world, and how humble and grateful people were for a medical student to talk to them. I was often overwhelmed, hot and exhausted so I learnt a lot about the effectiveness and importance of my own coping strategies.