

## Impressions- Cambodia Elective 2014

Elissa Calderwood

I completed my elective term in Cambodia, with the kind assistance of the Dr Carl Richard Jackson Scholarship from the Jackson family. The first four weeks was at the National Paediatric Hospital in Phnom Penh. The second four weeks was in the rural province of Takeo, working with an NGO called Women's Health Cambodia.

The National Paediatric Hospital is a large children's hospital, originally set up by World Vision and a number of other charities, but now funded and run by the government. All the doctors are Khmer, and there are a lot of local medical students. The doctors and students all speak some English, and were very keen to practise it with us! We were warmly welcomed, especially by the surgical department, where I spent two weeks and learned the most. My other weeks were in the HIV/AIDS ward and the Neonatal ward.

I learned a lot during my time at NPH, mostly about the differences in healthcare and medical training in Cambodia compared with Australia. There is a distinct lack of resources there, which showed itself in many ways. One example is the wards and theatres had limited amounts of equipment and supplies that we are used to having in Australia, such as gloves, hand sanitiser, oxygen saturation monitoring, and electronic IV fluid pumps. It was interesting to see how they functioned without these things. The medical training is also a bit different- for example it is all in French! The medical notes were written in French as well which made things interesting. I saw many interesting clinical cases, especially in the busy orthopaedic clinics. Cases that stand out include bone tumours, hip dysplasia, cleft palate repairs, hernias and hydroceles, traumas, oesophageal atresia, phimosis and dilatation, and HIV/AIDS opportunistic infections.

In the second half of the elective term I went from the crazy pulsating chaos of Phnom Penh to a quiet sleepy village in Takeo province. It was a welcome relief to get out of the city, which can be quite demanding for tourists, and into such a laid back and friendly little town. I felt like I was in another world, with cows wandering down the streets, people living in bamboo huts on stilts, riding everywhere and carrying everything on their bicycles, and surrounded by rice fields on every side. I was living with the translator, driver and cook from the NGO. The local food that the cook whipped up for us every day was delicious! We were a happy little team, and managed to get on well even though the translator and I were the only ones who spoke English! I did manage to pick up a little bit of Khmer by the end.

The translator and I spent the mornings at the small hospital (Prey Kabas Referral Hospital), where I saw a mix of the maternity ward, the clinic, and the inpatient ward. The common presentations seemed to be chest infections and gastroenteritis, TB, and some traumas. Anything major was transported to the bigger hospital at Takeo Hospital or Phnom Penh. It was a privilege to be present in the first moments of some tiny babies' lives, but also challenging to see how the management of labour and childbirth is quite different and not up to the standards we would expect in Australia.

Most afternoons we would go in the back of the tuk tuk out to the surrounding villages to do home visits with new mothers and babies. It was an amazing opportunity to get a real insight into the way people live there. There is still a lot of superstition and old wives tales- for example putting pepper

or the ash from incense in the baby's umbilical would to help it "heal"! The families loved having us visit, and often the room would fill up with all the cousin, neighbours kids, aunts and grandmas. On one visit there were five older ladies and fifteen kids watching!

Living in Cambodia was challenging and exciting, and I learned about living in another culture and what it means to be a foreigner. I had many experiences on elective that I will never forget, and I was stretched in ways that I would not have imagined. I would recommend going to Cambodia if you are up for a challenge, for being immersed in something completely different to everyday life, and for getting a real insight into people's lives and healthcare in this fascinating part of the world.

