

It is difficult to imagine what the people of Cambodia have endured in the country's most recent history - from the genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge during the 1970's, to the extreme poverty people continue to suffer from. It is with great gratitude that I thank the Jackson Family for awarding me with their incredibly generous scholarship, offering the opportunity to undertake my elective placement in Cambodia and to gain insight into what healthcare and life is like in this developing nation.

My first placement was based at Helen Bonner Health Centre, part of a growing non-government organisation called New Hope Cambodia (NHC) which offers free education and healthcare and sponsorship to poor and underprivileged people in slum villages on the outskirts of Siem Reap. Part of my work in the clinic involved taking a history and examination with a translator, before patients were seen by the clinic doctors and prescribed free medicine for their illness. The most common clinical presentations I saw included checkups for hypertension, diabetes, thyroid disease & gastritis & reflux symptoms, in addition to acute upper & lower respiratory illnesses. As access to diagnostic investigations was limited, I found this a great opportunity to practice my history taking and examination skills, and also develop skills with working with a translator.

My favourite experience at NHC was being able to visit patients while they were in hospital and then follow them up in the village after being discharged, gaining an insight into both how the public hospital system works and the extremely poor living conditions in the community. During my placement there was also many other volunteers in the clinic, social outreach program and school which meant I was able to make lots of new friends. Thanks to my family and friends back home, I set up a fundraiser page and we were able to raise some funds for the NGO. Without a doubt, I would highly recommend undertaking a placement at New Hope to prospective students doing elective in Cambodia. Other placements I considered in Siem Reap included Angkor Children's Hospital and the Lake Clinic Cambodia (although you need to get in early).

My second placement was based at the government-run National Pediatric Hospital (NPH) in the busy, capital city of Phnom Penh. I spent four weeks in the surgical department and was able to see many interesting congenital cases in general & orthopedic surgery in the operating theatres, on the ward and in outpatient clinics. Some examples of cases I saw in theatre include orthopedic fractures, ano-rectal malformations in a newborn, biliary atresia, meningo-encephalocele and spina bifida, in addition to a theatre entirely dedicated to cleft palate and lip repair, which I was able to observe and at times assist in surgery. Clinics were also very interesting and worthwhile attending including a general outpatient clinic every day, and weekly orthopedic, abdominal and cleft palate clinics. Unfortunately doctors in the public hospitals are paid a very minimal monthly salary, and as a result many choose to work in private practice in the afternoons, meaning placement hours are limited to the mornings. Sadly patients have to pay for their surgery and care whilst in hospital, different to Australia where care in our public hospitals is free. Amazingly, almost all equipment in the theatres was re-sterilisable - from the gowns, drapes, and surgical tools, again very different to that seen in Australia. Overall it was a great insight into the public hospital system in Cambodia. The staff in the surgical department were very welcoming and all the surgeons were able to speak English and were very good at teaching. I'd definitely recommend 4 weeks of placement in the surgical department at NPH if given the opportunity.

Placements aside, it was great opportunity to travel and learn much about the rich ancient and modern history of Cambodia from the Ancient temples of the Angkorian era, to the horrific Pol Pot regime in the 1970's where it's estimated 2 million Cambodians died at the hands of Pol Pot from torture, murder or extreme malnutrition.

Once again, I'd like to sincerely thank the Jackson family for the amazing opportunity to complete my elective placement in Cambodia, with thanks to the generous financial support of the Dr Carl Jackson Scholarship. I hope that one day I will be able to return as qualified doctor to offer whatever help to the poor and underprivileged people of Cambodia. I have many memories from my elective placement which will be with me forever.

- Sally Plunkett



Sunrise at Angkor Wat, with Elissa



Helen Bonner Health Centre, New Hope Cambodia, outskirts of Siem Reap



Village tour, New Hope Cambodia



Monthly 'rice drop' day with New Hope Cambodia staff and volunteers





Delivering toothbrushes to the children in the school one quiet clinic afternoon, New Hope Cambodia



Home Visit, New Hope Cambodia



Placement in the Surgical Department, National Pediatric Hospital, Phnom Penh



Surgical department team – with surgeons and medical students, National Pediatric Hospital



Assisting in surgery, National Pediatric Hospital



With trainee surgeons, in our surgical scrubs, National Pediatric Hospital