

The Dr. Carl Richard Jackson Scholarship

Elective Term in Cambodia, January-February 2013

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The two months I spent in Cambodia on Elective were the most challenging and eye-opening months I have experienced in medicine. Seeing and experiencing the country in and outside of the hospital gave me a new appreciation of the challenges faced in delivering universal health care. My hospital placements were at Preah Ket Mealea Hospital, in Phnom Penh, and The Angkor Hospital for Children, in Siem Reap. Both of which provided their own unique experience and look into health care in Cambodia. Spending two months in the vibrant and complex country that is Cambodia has had a lasting impact on me which I will carry with me throughout my career.

My first experience of Cambodia was flying into Phnom Penh. For the first 24 hours I was in a constant state of bewilderment. It is as beautiful as it is eye-opening. Considering the terrifying traffic, crowded markets, bustling tuk tuks and newly built sky scrapers, it is a city of contrasts. My time spent in Phnom Penh was a crash course in Cambodian culture. I was lucky enough to have locals show me the surrounding temples, palaces, markets, countryside and riverside. Seeing the varied ways in which the population lives gave a good insight into Cambodian culture. The most enduring visits were to the Choeung-Ek Genocide Museum and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, they gave a powerful look into the time of the Khmer Rouge. The lessons I learned while living in Phnom Penh were important to my time in the hospital as they gave context to the patients I saw and spoke with.

In Phnom Penh I spent four weeks at Preah Ket Mealea Hospital through Rose Charities. The majority of my time was spent with the fantastic Maxillofacial Surgical Team. Days at the hospital began with attending the morning consultant meetings and hearing the important cases of the day. Following this I would attend surgeries in the maxillofacial department or in the general hospital theatres, where I could watch urological and neurosurgical

procedures. Outside of these hours I was able to attend numerous private polyclinics, the Rose Charities Rehabilitation Centre and the Rose Charities Sight Centre. This enabled a very informative and important look at the various levels of Cambodian health care.



It was engrossing to see the differences between the highest and lowest levels of care. Surgeries performed under the lower levels of care were done on a miniscule budget. Saving money impacted the type of operation, anaesthetic, sterility and post-operative care. It was difficult to watch patients experience the full sensory experience of their surgery after only receiving a spinal block. Or see patient's families caring for their loved ones in the poorly lit post-operative ward as they were slowly recovering from the anaesthetic. It was impressive to see what the doctors were able to achieve with the low resources they worked with. However, it is a sad situation that they have to achieve so much with so little. I felt privileged to be working with the surgical teams, which were so welcoming and supportive to my understanding and learning. I gained so much insight from their support; it is a huge gift which I will keep with me throughout my career.

While in Phnom Penh I was able to visit the Goutte D'eau Centre, a centre which cares for children and teenagers with disabilities. It was a real treat to see the work they did at the centre. There was an excellent emphasis on the education, social and emotional support of the people that lived there. Coming to Cambodia I wanted to gain insight into how people with disabilities managed. Having seen many children and adults on the streets with disabilities, often being carried by their relatives, it was great to see what was being done. With more training I would like to help with the work the centre does in the future.

Before leaving Phnom Penh I saw the funeral service for King Sihanouk Norodom. The King's pyre had been progressively built over the previous month, with no expense spared. For the week leading up to the service the streets became progressively quieter and more cut-off as practice marches took place daily. On the day of the service the streets were lined with equal parts of white clad citizens and armed military. The procession moved through town slowly, followed by the throng of onlookers. The mood in the crowd wasn't that of great despair but more of sombre celebration.

My experience in Siem Reap at the Angkor Hospital for Children (AHC) was the best four weeks of medicine I have experienced. It was challenging, eye opening, despairing and uplifting. This is due to the excellent job done by the staff at the AHC. AHC is a non-profit paediatric hospital in Siem Reap run in cooperation with the Cambodian government. It has upwards of 50 beds, depending on the season, and the emergency department can see over 400 patients each day. At AHC I undertook three rotations, in the inpatients department, emergency and critical care unit. The staff spoke english meaning I could have full involvement in patient care. The senior doctors taught in english and



the junior doctors were extremely welcoming. It provided a huge amount of experience, with a large amount of late presenting conditions, and was an excellent model on how to provide the most health care with limited resources.

Apart from the clinical experience I received inside AHC, Siem Reap provided a great platform for discovering a side of Cambodia I hadn't seen in Phnom Penh. It was easy to escape the town of Siem Reap and get into the countryside. I spent a lot of my spare time exploring the country side as I felt that this was a good representation of how the majority of Cambodians lived. Through guided tours and talking to locals it was interesting to see the daily lives and issues that Cambodians dealt with. The problems in accessing basic needs such as food, shelter, transport and medicine were easy to see but difficult to overcome. This culminated in an afternoon of home visits through AHC to families with children with disabilities. The difference between my life in Australia and that of Cambodians was never as clear as when I saw how difficult it was for families to care for their disabled children. Joining the families and the AHC staff on these visits was an extremely humbling experience. It further outlined the fantastic work everyone at the hospital did and poignantly demonstrated what is lacking in their health care system.

My elective experience in Cambodia was a very eye-opening and humbling one. The interaction with patients and doctors in the hospital showed me a side of medicine I hadn't seen before. The disparity in resources and healthcare between Australia and Cambodia was a good lesson to learn at this stage of my training. To see how well the doctors were able to treat their patients despite the limitations was an excellent example going forward. It will certainly change the way I train and work through the rest of my career. Now wanting to make sure the skills I learn in Australia are transferable to a situation with limited resources. I think the time I spent in the community was invaluable to the whole experience. Understanding the social situation assisted immeasurably with my understanding of the patients' conditions and presentations. Endless thanks to The Dr Carl Richard Jackson Scholarship and the Jackson family for their support and to all the doctors and students who shared their experiences and country with me. It was an amazing and life changing experience.



Visiting communities
in the countryside
outside of Phnom
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