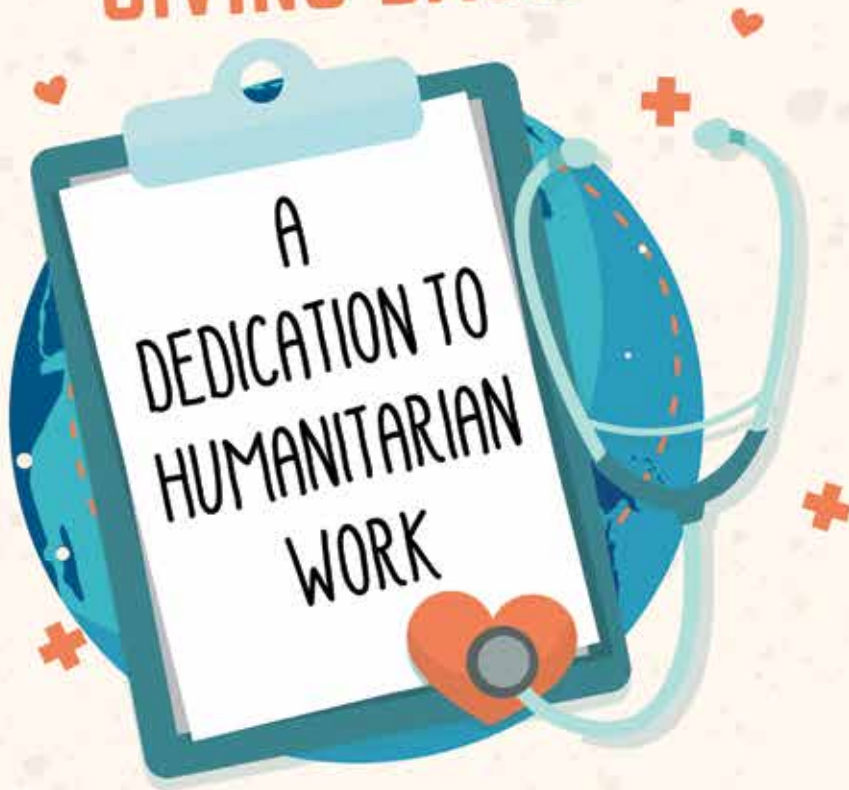


REACHING OUT, GIVING BACK



Text and photos by Dr Lee Qin Yi

When it all began

Summer holidays. Second year of medical school. Together with a group of 13 like-minded friends who wanted to spend our summer break making a difference, I volunteered for Project Khon Kaen – an annual outreach programme which aims to improve the standards of healthcare in Thailand's rural communities. After a two-and-a-half-hour flight and a one-hour bus journey, we found ourselves in Tok Pan Village. Ten memorable days were spent conducting basic health screening and raising health awareness on dengue fever, muscle aches and strains, and healthy eating. We also taught the local children some basic English and dental hygiene through simple flash cards, songs and dances.

That was how it all began – my very first foray into humanitarian work.

Electives. Fourth year of medical school. This time round, it was with nine

other international exchange students in Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital in Kumasi, Ghana. While on our one-month attachment, Dimitrios, a student from Greece, was inspired to organise an outreach to a provincial school. Shaid, a PhD Student from UK doing his research in Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, put us in touch with the local charities. Eva, a research student from the US Institute for Healthcare Improvement Open School gathered the necessary educational materials



and posters, while the rest of us (medical students from the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Singapore) eagerly came up with ideas to make it a memorable experience for the local children. Everything fell into place swiftly and within days, we were off to Abono Primary School. Through song and dance, we taught the students the importance of healthy eating, personal hygiene and dental care. My very first experience with a multi-national collaboration was a roaring success!

Present. Third year general surgery residency. In the last three years, I have participated in two short medical mission trips to Cambodia with the more recent one in March this year to Kampong Chhnang, organised by Tzu Chi Foundation. With more than 100 volunteers from Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, we provided treatment for more than 3,400 villagers in a span of two and a half days. Locally, I help out by providing medical support at various Tzu Chi events and volunteering at their Free Clinic in Redhill whenever I can.

What I have learnt

Through these numerous experiences, it dawned on me that collaboration and team work were the cornerstones for the success of the various projects. Without the support of the local community during those international missions, the language barriers, logistics, our safety and even local publicity would have been significant challenges.

Without the support of our nursing or allied health colleagues, the major international medical missions would not have been able to run so smoothly.

These include the triage nurses who were the first point of contact for the villagers; the scrub nurses who skilfully cleaned and draped, and handed me the appropriate instruments (usually



before I even ask for it) with one hand while they retracted the tissue or dabbed away blood to clean the field with the other hand; and the circulating nurse who expeditiously cleaned and sterilised the limited instruments we had on hand so they could be reused, before gently dressing the wound and providing appropriate post-operative advice to the patients.

There were also the pharmacists who dispensed medication efficiently and counselled patients on how to take their medications. And not to be forgotten are the non-medical volunteers who provided logistical support. It is truly amazing how they were able to transform an empty room to a fully functional temporary operating theatre with six beds or an empty field to a giant consultation area within hours!

When a less busy team is done for the day, it's not uncommon to see them in the pharmacy tent helping with the dispensing, or in the traditional Chinese medicine tent helping with the removal of acupuncture needles, or attending to patients in the internal medicine tent. The camaraderie we built over the span of the trip was indeed strong. It is always refreshing to meet new volunteers from different countries and from all walks of life, especially when we all share a similar vision and passion for humanitarian work.

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

– Helen Keller

How one can prepare

Participating in an international medical mission trip is invariably a humbling experience but it may be a culture shock for some. Long bumpy bus rides to the remote villages; children running around in the dirt with no shoes or clothes on; hospital beds crammed in the corridors, sometimes with two patients to a bed; and occasionally not being able to help certain patients despite our best efforts, are just some examples. Additionally, there may not always be access to piped hot water, electricity or proper beds; insects may be plentiful, and we may have to work under the scorching sun with no fan. Yet, despite their poverty and limited resources, the villagers still manage to remain cheerful and are



always so grateful for the aid rendered. We are indeed privileged to be in sunny Singapore, where we do not have to worry about having access to clean water, electricity and reliable healthcare – simple things which I am sure many of us have taken for granted.

If you are planning on embarking on this amazing journey of medical humanitarian work, here are some tips to bear in mind.

- Always keep an open mind.
- Be sensible and respect the local cultures and customs.
- Be mindful of safety and always stay within the group.
- Try learning a few common words or local phrases. This always brings on a smile.
- Remember the non-verbal cues and body language. Sometimes, a smile, a pat on the back or even a hug is all it takes to make someone's day.
- Start planning early and project leave in advance. I am lucky to have a supportive department and team in NHG Residency.
- Volunteering starts at home. Consider spending your off day helping out at a HealthServe clinic for migrant workers, Tzu Chi Free Clinic, or other outreach means.

It's never too early to start nor too late to make a difference! ♦

"We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something."

– Mother Theresa



Legend

1. Dental health workshop in Abono Primary School, Kumasi
2. Performing minor surgery in Kampong Chhnang
3. Cheeky children in Tok Pan Village, Khon Kaen

Dr Lee is an alumna of Leicester Medical School who recognises the importance of inter-professional collaboration. She hopes to inculcate such positive values in the young medical students and junior doctors whom she mentors. Once a week, she can also be found in Alliance Française taking French lessons. *La Joie de Vivre!*

