



— IN THE — SPIRIT *of* Service SETTING SAIL WITH DOVE

Text by Wharton Chan | Photos by Project DOVE

Wharton Chan is a first year medical student from Duke-NUS Medical School (Duke-NUS). He is excited to be part of Project DOVE 2017 and to embark on a volunteering trip to Bandung, Indonesia, in April. Prior to Duke-NUS, Wharton graduated from Pembroke College, Oxford, with an MBiochem. Wharton is now part of the MD-PhD programme in Duke-NUS



It seems to me that volunteer work is an integral part of being a medical student: the plethora of clinical skills and knowledge goes hand in hand with the spirit of service and giving, and the synergy between them very much defines the medical profession. As students, we have much to learn outside the classroom and volunteer work is an alluring choice to widen our exposure before we officially enter the medical profession. But how exactly can we maximise learning in such experiences? In Duke-NUS Medical School (Duke-NUS), one such brilliant opportunity is Project DOVE – short for Duke-NUS Overseas Volunteering Expedition.

Project DOVE is a student-initiated project that started in 2010. As the name suggests, the project comprises an overseas trip where the objective is to apply clinical skills among rural populations. The team's destinations since have been Chiang Mai, Cambodia, and Bandung, Indonesia. The team has traditionally worked with local partners to set up mobile clinics and health screening programmes to serve the rural communities, and also provide health education to the population.

how this project differs from others. There are many volunteer opportunities nowadays, with many involving overseas endeavours, such as building bridges and houses. While the notion of a mobile clinic may be appropriate for medical students, I challenged my thoughts on the uniqueness of this project and arrived at a conclusion: Project DOVE offers the precious learning opportunity outside of the books that advance our clinical understanding, with a focus on giving back to the community. Moreover, it seemed that the project could have lasting impacts on communities if executed properly.

I vividly remember the time when I was interviewed for a place in the committee; one concern that came up repeatedly was the need for sustainability in the project. Provided that the previous expedition teams had mostly visited a different location, it was a difficult issue to solve. It would be possible to follow up with our partners, but they would already have had sustainable local efforts and it seemed like what we could add would be minimal. This led me to think deeper about the nature of volunteer trips – was it at the point of being some kind of tourism that was being exploited? There are online articles that report negative opinions of the target communities, stating that the “bridges and houses” built would have been better received if direct donations were given instead. Did these sentiments point to a reality that volunteers are oblivious of? My concerns

Legend

1. Health Education for the school (Project Dove 2015)
2. Consultation and screening (Project Dove 2015)
3. Faculty clinician in consultation (Project Dove 2015)

The true purpose

What appeals to me most about Project DOVE is the chance to practise and learn about global health, which not only is a rare opportunity in itself, but it also exemplifies the spirit of serving those in need. However, I wondered



were reaffirmed when the interviewers raised this question: "How would you prevent the villagers from selling the supplies we give them?" It seemed that it wasn't only me who was wondering about this problem.

We got our answers when the committee had our first meeting; it was announced that we would be returning to the same site – Bandung, Indonesia – as the 2016 team had. By doing so, we hoped that we could create a long-term relationship with our local partner, Crisis Relief Singapore (CRS), and the community itself. That way, sustainability can be achieved by focusing on data collection for local epidemiology and also by forging relationships with the community. On top of that, it seemed that the tangible impact of mobile clinics would be rather different from construction, as medical expertise is not one that can be easily learnt.

The preparation commences

With my thoughts at ease, I looked forward to the preparation for our trip which included raising funds and asking for sponsorships, planning the logistics and preparing for the programme during the trip itself. Perhaps of most significance is the rigorous training in preparation of the trip: currently, we have planned seminars on global health, crucial clinical skills training for the

first year students (Year 1s) and special workshops conducted by faculty on specific diseases. As a Year 1, this seemed to embody the excitement and spirit of the trip – that we would increase the skills in our arsenal and use them on the ground as we assist the clinicians going with us. With four doctors going on the trip with us, and an assisting doctor from CRS, we hope to conduct three full days of mobile clinic sessions in Bandung, with an extra visit to a local school for health education.

Subtle but promising signs of the intangible impacts on the student body have also started showing. The hard medical skills were only to be complemented by soft skills such as leadership and teamwork. Part of the beauty of the project was to link together the third year students (Year 3s), who have had clinical experience in clerkships, with the Year 1s. As I have observed from the meetings thus far, not only are the Year 1s proactive in learning from the Year 3s, but the Year 3s are also willing to teach many things, from medical knowledge to minute administrative skills. The bond between the committee continues to foster by the day as we plan our trip in earnest.

The preparation phase has been bustling since December last year. So far, the programmes have been tentatively decided and some interesting materials have been produced for the health



education segment. As I watched the other teams in the committee work attentively to bring the trip to fruition, my feet tingled with excitement at each progress I saw. With the tireless work from our leaders, Shermain Chia and Alicia Ong, the destination can be seen in the horizon, and soon we will be ready to set sail. ♦

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