



Bringing Back the Sound of Music

By Bernard Tan

"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." – Mother Teresa

It was by pure chance that I had the opportunity to go on an ear surgery camp in Bangladesh. I was on elective with the Department of Otolaryngology, Singapore General Hospital, when my supervisor, Dr David Lau, mentioned that he would be away for a week to do mission work in Bangladesh. "On second thought," he said, "why don't you come along with me? It will be a good learning experience for you." My heart leaped and I immediately asked for more details. My mentor elaborated, "I've been going for these trips a few years now. We go to rural areas in Bangladesh to operate on village folk with perforated ear drums." I immediately agreed and made the necessary arrangements.

Our team consisted of two otolaryngologists, Dr Eng Soh Ping and Dr David Lau; two anaesthetists, Dr Wang Chin Foong and Dr Diana Chan; an organiser, Dr Jancy Wong; and two medical students, Jacklyn Yek and me. We were going under the auspices of IMPACT Foundation, an international non-governmental organisation whose goal was to reduce disability worldwide. Our plan was to fly to Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh), take a domestic flight to Jessore (a small city in the division of Khulna, southwestern Bangladesh), and then travel via ground transport to Jibon Mela Health Center in the district of Meherpur, where we would carry out operations to repair as many ear

drums as we could over a three-day period. Meherpur is one of the poorest districts in Bangladesh. It hardly has any qualified doctors, and according to our local contacts, there are no otolaryngologists in the entire division. Thus, the villagers suffer from a host of ear problems, such as tympanic membrane perforations and ear infections.

Upon arrival, we were received by a large group of people. A distinguished-looking gentleman stepped forward and, with a warm handshake, introduced himself as Dr Shaiful Kabir, the director of the mission hospital, Jibon Mela. He expressed his joy and gratitude to be able to host us and work with us over the next few days. Each one of us was presented with a large bouquet of flowers, a taste of the incredible hospitality we were about to receive.

Ever efficient, the doctors of Jibon Mela had helped us to search for and prepare potential surgical candidates. 70 individuals with chronic suppurative otitis media or chronic tympanic membrane perforation were identified, subjected to pre-op investigations (blood tests, chest x-rays, ECGs and audiograms) and counselled for possible surgery. Our task was to select the best surgical candidates from this pool of patients. As we could only perform an estimated 20 surgeries in our short time there, priority was given to patients with quiescent ear infections, small

central perforations (with the best chance for recovery after surgery), or moderate to severe hearing loss. 25 patients were selected and told to prepare themselves to receive surgery.

Working in Jibon Mela's sole operating theatre (OT) was a pleasant experience. It was a large, clean room with a charming view of the surrounding farmland. Our surgeons operated on one patient at a time, with the students taking turns being the scrub techs. I learnt that day that watching a surgery from afar paled in comparison to being involved in it. I quickly learnt by heart the steps of the surgery, the purpose for each step, the possible complications and the surgical tools involved at each phase. I had to stay two steps ahead of the surgeon, preparing the tools that he would soon request.

In between surgeries, the team members would adjourn to the adjacent tea room to recuperate over a cup of locally produced tea and butter biscuits. Mealtimes

were lovely occasions – the team would sit down to a lavish meal prepared by the in-house chef, while Dr Kabir regaled us with stories from Bangladesh's history and his personal life. He shared with us that he left his comfortable job as a doctor with a tea company and joined IMPACT Foundation to serve the poor of his country. His humanity and passion for his work was evident when he remarked, "In my last job, I was well paid and was provided a large house with 11 servants. Now, I do not enjoy such luxuries anymore, but each day I know that we are doing something good and meaningful for the people. My elder daughter will be starting her medical studies soon and I hope she will one day choose to join me." This made me reflect on my own experience in the medical profession. Most enter the profession out of altruism, but the journey is hard and long, and many individuals lose sight of their noble ideals and descend into cynicism, resentment and greed. Along the way, everyone needs to experience a defining moment that rekindles the fire in their heart and gives them the strength to remain true to their calling. For me, that moment was an epiphany – I learnt that to find true happiness, one has to find one's true calling and not pursue material wealth blindly.

After three days of non-stop surgeries at a feverish pace, it was time for us to return home. With a heavy heart, we exchanged email addresses and bade farewell to our hosts. The warmth and hospitality that we received at Jibon Mela was without equal and all of us looked forward to returning in the future.

This story wouldn't be complete without touching on the IMPACT Foundation. The IMPACT Foundation was founded in 1982 with the goal of spearheading "an international initiative against avoidable disablement". It does so via the following programmes: safe water and sanitation, antenatal screening and obstetric care, vaccinations, screening and early treatment of diseases, and accessible surgeries for disability. Surgery for disability focuses on several debilitating but reversible conditions: tympanic membrane perforation/cholesteatoma, cataracts, cleft lip/palate, club feet and hydrocephalus. Qualified surgeons and scrub nurses, largely from developed countries, would volunteer their expertise and operate on needy individuals pro bono. IMPACT facilitates this by handling the logistics of the mission and raising funds. IMPACT's mission hospitals are ideal support bases. There, local doctors hired by IMPACT screen and counsel the potential surgical candidates prior to the arrival of the international teams and provide continuous care after their departure.

I would recommend any doctor who is thinking about medical mission work to consider working with IMPACT Foundation. Having gone on and also led a few medical trips personally (Project Lokun to Cambodia in 2009 and 2010), I can attest to how difficult and stressful it is to plan,



Jacklyn (left) helping Dr Eng prepare a tympanic membrane graft, and in the background, Dr Wang keeps a watchful eye on the patient's vitals

fundraise and lead an overseas mission. It is no small task to raise sufficient funds, identify needy populations and suitable surgical candidates (which require a recce trip), find transport and accommodation, overcome language and cultural barriers, and follow up on patients. IMPACT Foundation provides international teams with logistical support, funding and local medical partners, which allow the specialist teams to focus their energies on doing what they do best – surgery. IMPACT has operations in many developing countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Phillipines, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand and Zanzibar) and the possibilities for service are limitless. Dr Eng Soh Ping is the founding member of IMPACT Foundation Singapore and has organised three expeditions to Bangladesh to date.

When discussing the topic of overseas medical missions with classmates and friends, I often encounter cynicism. Most comments usually run along the vein of “There are already so many patients in Singapore, why are you going overseas to do work?” The answer to this came when I attended the ActivAid symposium on overseas volunteerism. An eminent orthopaedic surgeon shared his motivations for taking a week off every two months from his busy Mount Elizabeth practice, to operate pro bono in an Indian mission hospital. “When I close my Mount E clinic for a week, the patients will just take the lift and see any of the other 35 orthopaedic surgeons in this hospital,” he said, “whereas those poor people in India have nobody to care for them.”

Perhaps you too might find it rewarding to reach out and touch lives beyond our borders. If you are interested to know more about IMPACT Foundation, visit their website at <http://www.impact.org.uk/>. Meanwhile, if you are interested to know more about IMPACT Foundation Singapore or how to volunteer with IMPACT, contact Dr Eng at dreng@ascentent.com. **SMA**



Bernard is a final year medical student from Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. He is active in overseas mission work as well as local community service. He thinks that doctors (in their spare time) can reach out and bring about positive changes in society, and every small effort is a step in the right direction.



Jacklyn stitching up an incision



We all looked forward to the meals there!



We were given these huge bouquets of roses and jasmine on arrival – what a pleasant surprise!