



# Learning in the Land of Smiles

Text and photos by Hwang Kai Yin and Jonathan Gerard Seow

**“EXCUSE ME,** where is Ramathibodi Hospital?”

The security guard, whom we had posed the question to, and an overly curious elderly lady peered at our map. It was a simple line drawing that the hospital's Department of Medicine had emailed to the six of us medical students, prior to our arrival in the capital of the Land of Smiles in June last year. Somehow, either the address given to us did not match the hospital's location in the real world, or our erstwhile taxi driver had taken advantage of our unfamiliarity with the area. A short confused exchange took place, before we decided to follow the map – after all, it was only supposed to be a few blocks away, or less than a centimetre on the drawing.

In the falling dusk, after walking for close to half an hour and passing numerous unmarked and rundown buildings, we finally found it – and then again, maybe we didn't. The Military Police Headquarters slid by in the dark as our luggage bags rattled along the unevenly paved sidewalk. Unsure of our position, we decided to send a scouting party forward to confirm our bearings. Finally, green glowing letters, marking the place we would call home for the following month, materialised over the horizon.

## **In the hospital wards**

Our first day began bright and early at 8.15 am, with a short introduction to the hospital and other

administrative matters by the very helpful staff at the International Relations Office. We were then distributed into our host departments, which we had chosen about a month earlier, while preparing for our final examinations at the National University of Singapore. Some of us were fortunate in that our department (for example, A&E) had full-day programmes planned for us, while other departments (for example, Surgery) did not manage to provide a supervisor on the first day to orientate us to their routines.

The subsequent days proved to be extremely educational in multiple ways for all of us – in the outpatient and A&E settings, a wide variety of diseases was seen; and in the inpatient setting, complicated cases such as those in the ICU were discussed in depth. Some of us even managed to pick up a few Thai words during the patient-doctor interactions and ward rounds, and used them to communicate with the locals.

What struck us most was the lack of top-down hierarchy within the teams caring for patients – each doctor, no matter their rank, was respected for their suggestions, not belittled for being wrong; and in turn, the more junior staff were also more open to clarifying their doubts and learning from their mistakes. Even the medical students and doctors interacted on a very personal level and this aided the learning process greatly.

Another thing we noticed was the difference in educational styles. In Singapore, we tend to be incredibly theoretical and academic, focusing on teachings and tutorials where huge amounts of information are poured into the medical student. However, the Thais tend to be more hands-on in their training. For example, when learning about the Extended-Focused Abdominal Sonographic Test, the students were first given a short lecture to introduce them to the topic, and then immediately brought to an ultrasound machine to practice on each other. Additionally, the work environment in Thailand was relatively forgiving and stress-free, and hence extremely conducive for learning.

A gesture we appreciated greatly was that although the teams were more comfortable discussing their cases in Thai, many consultants would put in great effort to speak in English when they deemed the topic suitable for our learning level. In some teams, a doctor or medical student would also help us translate and summarise portions of the conversations.

The lucky one among us who was attached to the A&E also got to attend the residents' farewell party, undergo Objective Structured Clinical Examination and Spot Diagnosis assessments, go for conferences in other hospitals, take part in a Disaster Mass Casualty Exercise and visit a snake farm run by the Red Cross – all extra activities arranged to maximise the learning experience.

### Exploring the streets of Bangkok

After our work had ended each day, we were free to utilise the campus facilities (including a library, computer lab, gym, and sports centre), as well as explore the city. We duly visited cultural sites such as Wat Phra Kaew and Dusit Palace, which have magnificent architecture and illustrious histories. Next on the list was Dusit Zoo, which turned out to be a memorable experience. Unlike its Singaporean counterpart, Dusit Zoo is a mash-up of a bird park, night safari, aquarium and petting zoo. Situated in the middle of Bangkok, this 18-hectare compound houses more than 1,600 animals in reptile and mammal enclosures, fish tanks, and even has pens of camels, cows and goats that tourists are allowed to feed. After this tiring excursion, one of us wolfed down four Potong ice creams, purchased from the numerous conveniently located street-side stalls within the zoo, in a row!

Our nights were often spent in Bangkok's shopping and eating districts (such as Siam and Mahboonkrong), as we embarked on a culinary adventure to expand our appetites for more Thai food. It was an incredible experience and many of us left feeling both exhilarated and distraught (likely at the fact that they probably gained a lot of weight).

As the sun set over the Suvarnabhumi Airport on our last day in Bangkok, we cast a final glance over the Thai skyline. The green curry we had had for lunch settled warmly in our small intestines, but what would stick with us beyond the test of time were the memories of the



**Facing Bustling Bangkok**

**Top** The six of us on a visit to Dusit Palace

**Bottom** Learning about X-rays in class

past month and the warm hospitality of the locals. The friendships forged with our Thai colleagues and enriched medical knowledge we gained would definitely serve us well in our future medical careers, whichever path we may choose.

The engine rumbled. *Time to return to reality.* **SMA**



*Kai Yin is a fourth year medical student who likes to try everything at least once.*



*Jonathan is a fourth year medical student and the former Publications Director of the National University of Singapore Medical Society. He enjoys photography, videography and video-editing in his free time.*