

Extending a H.E.L.P.ing Hand


Text and photos by Denise Au Eong

"I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world."

– Mary Anne Radmacher

I WAS privileged to be part of a group of passionate healthcare professionals and volunteers from Singapore who visited Nepal for a week from 17 to 24 March last year, for H.E.L.P. (Health, Education and Livelihood Project) Nepal 2013 – a charity expedition to the remote rural village of Bandipur in the Tanahu region jointly organised by the Rotary Club of Singapore and Nepal's Rotary Club of Patan West.

Being an avid photographer who loves to capture moments of life through my camera lens, I took this opportunity to record the group's activities and the beautiful scenery in Nepal. Needless to say, my camera was always slung over my shoulder during the entire expedition.



Long queues of villagers waiting patiently for their turn to consult the doctors



Happy young villagers with toys given out by the volunteers

We first flew from Singapore and landed at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. Then we immediately headed to Swayambhunath Temple, part of Kathmandu Valley (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), where we took in the majestic view of the valley and surrounding mountains. As night descended, we checked into Dwarika's Hotel and savoured a traditional six-course Newari welcome dinner. It was my first taste of Nepali food. I must admit that it tasted very foreign to me, vastly different from the food in Singapore, but was nevertheless a pleasant meal.

On the second day, we travelled 143 kilometres by coach to Bandipur. En route, we delighted in magnificent views of the Himalayan mountain range. It was definitely a sight to behold – wonders of nature! When we reached our destination, the villagers gave us a warm welcome, with a colourful parade that included loud, cheerful live music and entertaining traditional dances.

Tending to patients

The next day, different members of the team started on their respective community projects, which included irrigation, education, bee farming and a medico-dental health camp. I joined the health camp which was held in the village hospital at the top of a hill. Bandipur Hospital looked different from the hospitals in Singapore, save for the (meagre number of) familiar medical supplies and beds. It lacked air conditioning and fans, and had very basic facilities. However, with all the windows wide open and the sun's rays casting shadows on the floor, it felt every bit as cosy and comfortable as our own hospitals.

The medical professionals and volunteers divided themselves into a medical team and a dental one, each

occupying a different hospital building. They tended to many Nepalis who had travelled from far and wide. The queues of patients were long and wound across the grassy waiting areas like snakes, with seemingly no end in sight.

The medical team included a Singaporean paediatrician and a radiation oncologist who provided both paediatric and adult general medical treatment. A Singaporean ophthalmologist teamed up with two Nepali ophthalmologists and an optometrist to see patients with ophthalmic complaints. A number of Singaporean and Nepali nurses assisted the doctors, two Singaporean pharmacists dispensed medicines while lay volunteers helped with registration, ushering and crowd control. Everyone had a job to do and we were kept busy from dawn until dusk, only taking breaks during mealtimes.

Preparation for the mission trip had started way before we first stepped foot on Nepali soil. For instance, the Singaporean ophthalmologist first appealed to optometrists and LASIK centres for used glasses for recycling and to pharmaceutical companies for eye medications and supplies. He received an overwhelming response. More than 800 pairs of used spectacles were collected, which were then cleaned and had their powers checked and labelled. Several pharmaceutical companies also generously donated some eye medications and basic eye equipment. It was heartening to see the professionals and companies going the extra mile to help those in need in a foreign land.

During the health camp, the local optometrist refracted patients and dispensed the donated spectacles with the closest power appropriate for them. About 400 patients were screened by the ophthalmologists, with most having ocular discomfort due to dry eye in adults and allergies in

children. A number of elderly patients had impaired vision due to cataracts, and their names and contact details were recorded so that they could be contacted when a local eye team returns to the village to perform cataract surgery in the future. Unused glasses, medications and some basic eye equipment were later given to a local eye hospital in a nearby town where the two Nepali ophthalmologists were based.

Heavily pregnant women were examined to make sure their pregnancies were going along well. Children were checked for allergies and infections, and subsequently sent home with the appropriate medicines. Many also came for treatment of cough and flu.

Meanwhile, the dental team helped to clean patients' teeth and extracted those that were badly decayed. Most of them suffered from poor oral hygiene, and those with more serious problems were referred to the hospital in town for further management.

Exploring the community

We took turns to explore the daily lives of the people in the community to understand them better. We visited some of the amenities that had been constructed in the past few years. One of them was a water irrigation project: a water tank had been built high up on a hill to collect rainwater to irrigate the farms and provide water to the villagers. Another was a new school – stepping foot into this school was a whole new experience for me when I saw how the children in Nepal were being educated. The dimly lit classrooms were much smaller than those in Singapore. The textbooks were made of flimsy, poor quality paper and their contents were not fully accurate. It made me realise how fortunate I was to be living and studying in a developed country. We also stopped by other schools in the neighbourhood and distributed toys, stationery and clothes to the students. The children were very welcoming and friendly, and also very intrigued by our cameras.

Sitting in a coach for long hours is not a very fun activity, but it was all worthwhile when we reached Nepal's second most populous city, Pokhara, which is 60 kilometres west of Bandipur and framed by the Annapurna range, overlooking the tranquil Lake Fewa. After filling our stomachs with a buffet lunch, we headed for an afternoon of sightseeing, which included attractions like the International Mountain Museum and Devi's Falls.

Early at 4 am the following day, we boarded the coach for Sarangot Hill. From the foot of the hill, we trekked uphill for an hour to enjoy the spectacular sunrise – a glowing fireball peeking out from just behind the mighty Himalayan range – about 1,592 metres from the summit. We had a breathtaking bird's eye view of the Pokhara valley, along with prominent Himalayan mountains like Annapurna, Gangapurna, Machapuchre, Dhualagiri, Manaslu and Tukuhe. Thereafter, we bid farewell to Pokhara and continued onward to Kathmandu, travelling down the Mahabharat range and along the scenic valley of the Trisuli River.



Top A volunteer nurse letting a patient try out a pair of donated glasses

Bottom The H.E.L.P. Nepal 2013 team

On our second last day, we visited Kathmandu Durbar Square, another UNESCO Heritage Site, where ancient palaces, temples, courtyards, and quadrangles built during the reigns of the 11th century Malla and Shah kings still stand today. We also managed to catch a glimpse of the current royal Kumari, a fascinating tradition in Nepal.

I think what is beautiful about going to a developing country is that it really opens up your eyes – the sights, the sounds, or the people. You realise how cold and unfriendly our Singaporean society can sometimes be when you feel the warmth and hospitality radiating off the Nepali people. You forget the hustle and bustle of the city and just relax with the glistening night sky above you. It takes your breath away and transports you into a whole new other world.

If I had to sum up H.E.L.P. Nepal in one word, that would be – *eye-opener!* ■

Interested to participate in H.E.L.P. Nepal? Contact team leader Dr Tham Meng Keat to find out more!

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