

Project DOVE *in Full Flight*

Text and photos by Brian Chan

A TEAM from the Duke-NUS Overseas Volunteering Expedition (DOVE) travelled to Vietnam from 27 April to 2 May 2014, and had the privilege of serving the people of Long Hai town in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province. Project DOVE was established with the goals of having a longitudinal health impact on underprivileged groups and providing doctors in training with exposure to community Medicine and opportunities to hone their clinical acumen. This year was especially exciting for us as it marked the beginning of a new partnership with Doan Tu Thien Thu Phap Thien Tam, a local organisation that runs a private clinic catering to the basic medical needs of villagers in the district.





Enjoying some downtime with mangoes and *non la* ("leaf hats")

After arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, we travelled two hours by coach to the southeastern coast, where we were warmly welcomed by the Catholic nuns who manage the clinic. We quickly settled in for the night, and were up at the crack of dawn the next day to prepare for the first clinic session. Seeing a sea of eager patients waiting outside the doors was undeniably intimidating, especially to a first year with little clinical experience.

However, performing alongside like-minded individuals did wonders for my resolve, reminding me that as a future medical practitioner, I wasn't just pursuing a career, but a passion. For ten hours every day, we manned the triage, conducted physical examinations and screened endless queues of patients who were suffering from malnutrition and disease. However, our toughest duty was to ask many patiently waiting villagers – some had travelled miles with their entire families – to return the following morning. Despite the intense working conditions and lack of material comforts, we never felt more compassionate and humbled to see our small medical contributions making a difference in the villagers' lives.

Project DOVE's long-standing involvement with rural Medicine also made us acutely aware of the health and social disparities that the economically disadvantaged face. Correcting such inequalities will take more than just the one-on-one relationships that are at the heart of a physician's calling. To that end, we conducted several interactive sessions with children and adults, which covered a series of topics including hand and oral hygiene, basic first aid, diabetes, hypertension, stroke and smoking, during our time in Vietnam. We strongly believe that education instils empowerment and ownership, factors crucial to the sustainability of healthcare.

Medicine, for me, has always been about developing a social consciousness, where healthcare professionals utilise highly specialised knowledge in the service of others. And while Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School does offer a unique medical programme built on the principles of inquiry, flexibility of choice and in-depth exploration, my initial

Doctors in training Angela Yap and Cheng Yu-Ching (second and third from left) working closely with their Vietnamese peers



First year MD/PhD candidate Liu Shiyang and third year medical student Zeng Wanling (second and third from left) taking care of their patients



Swapping stories with our Vietnamese counterparts over lunch

concern was whether I would be able to stay rooted in the humanistic side of Medicine while continuing to engage in the scientific and clinical components. After studying at Duke-NUS for almost one year, I find my sentiments echoed in the way my school values giving back to society, placing it on par with academic commitments in coursework, clinical rotations and research. Such a holistic education will stand its students in good stead, strengthening their civic and moral values while nurturing servant leadership, all to become public-minded physicians who will pay it forward. ■

For more information about Project DOVE, please email studentcouncil.dukenus@gmail.com.

"The giving of love is an education in itself." – Eleanor Roosevelt



Brian is a first year candidate in the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School MD programme, and President of the Class of 2017. He strives to go beyond the call of duty for everyone around him... and still make it home at a decent hour.