

Small Things with Great Love

Project Sothea

The authors are Year One medical students from NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. They are members of Project Sothea and will be continuing with the project this year.

PROFILE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

DEEPANRAJ

Deepanraj loves reading and is always keen to catch a movie. He also aspires to travel widely to discover new worlds and friends.



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

MICHELLE LEE

Michelle has always been passionate about community service, having been in the interact club and worked with children with autism. She aspires to travel around the world and help people in poverty.

Project Sothea is a student-led project under the Rotaract Club of Singapore (City), which comprises enthusiastic Year One and Two medical students and dedicated doctors from various fields. For the past six years, the team has been working with the Khmer Foundation for Justice, Peace and Development (Khmer Foundation) and Peaceful Children's Home II (PCH II) in Cambodia. Project Sothea reaches out to hundreds of Cambodians each year, with health screenings, health education and developmental efforts as the main modes of service.

In December 2015, we embarked on our sixth trip. It was yet another successful effort – our health screening programmes reached over 500 people and a host of new initiatives were introduced.

As first-timers, we did not truly know what to expect prior to the trip. However, the warm welcome we received from the children at PCH II gave us a glimpse of the hospitality we would experience over the next few days and strengthened our resolve to reciprocate the Cambodians' unencumbered affection through our efforts.

After a day of packing drugs, we welcomed the doctors who volunteered to join us amid their busy schedules. Some of us also engaged school-going youth volunteers from the Khmer New Generation Organisation (KNGO) to prepare them for the health education lessons that would take place subsequently. Together with the arrival of our friends from International University in Phnom

Penh and Battambang, we were ready to proceed.

We conducted screenings in Kamping Puoy, PCH II and Sra Kaew over six days. Our screening process comprised registration, measurement of height and weight, taking of vital signs, health education, consultations and pharmacy stations. Health education was conducted during waiting periods.

Over the course of the screenings, we observed many noteworthy trends, which reflected the harsh realities of life for the rural Cambodians, with undernourishment featuring prominently. Most of the schoolchildren were in the lowest stratum of the Cambodian height-and-weight percentile charts, with a good number falling under the lower few percentile bands.

A new addition to this year's trip was house visitation conducted for the immobile who could not attend our screenings. These included pregnant women, stroke patients and elderly patients with lower limb fractures. Together with our passionate doctors, we reached out to over a dozen families. Through these visits, we learnt the value of medical care and the change it can bring to the lives of the impoverished.

One of the residents we met during the house visits presented with a severe hip injury from a bad fall years ago. She had been walking on all fours since her injury, as her legs were unable to support her weight. On the advice of Dr Barbara Helen Rosario,

the geriatrician in the team, we arranged for an adjustable pair of crutches for the patient. In just the space of an afternoon, we saw a lady who had been confined to the limits of her house being empowered to move around on her own with a simple aid.

However, it was not all good news. There were a few instances where villagers presented with chronic ailments that required long-term care. Recognising our constraints, the team did feel a tad disheartened for being unable to provide for these individuals.

It was during such occasions that the words of Dr Winston Lim, one of the accompanying doctors, offered us encouragement. He shared that it meant a lot to the rural Cambodians when they see Singaporean doctors come to their villages to treat them. The knowledge that they were receiving treatment from some of the region's best was in itself a source of joy and comfort to them. He explained that our willingness to reach out to these communities possibly engendered the kind of intangible benefits that could not be replicated by the mere provision of material resources.

This message reinforced our determination to continue to help as many people as we could to the best of our abilities. These experiences would also give us the solemn understanding that we cannot possibly provide long-term solutions to the problems faced by the villagers. If our presence provided symptomatic relief, then the cure would be to inspire and empower the Cambodian communities to share resources and manpower to solve prevalent issues.

One way we helped in this aspect was by furnishing the village health post with a new delivery bed, basic surgical equipment and first-aid kits. We felt that this was particularly important, as the nearest hospital was two hours away by road and virtually impossible to get to after dark.

Furthermore, we saw great potential for sustainability during our engagements with the KNGO youth volunteers, who would continue to conduct lessons for the villages throughout the year in our absence.



Following our training methods and syllabi, these volunteers will conduct health education at our two beneficiary villages, covering a host of topics ranging from sanitation to contraception. As the volunteers have tertiary education and hail from that region, they possess both the technical knowledge on the aforementioned topics as well as the cultural sensitivity required to overcome any sociocultural hurdles.

Meanwhile, our medical and nursing peers from International University gave us the conviction that we would soon be able to pass the baton to them. Tean Mengheang, a fourth year medical student said: "I want to become a doctor and set up a camp like this during the holidays every year." Project Sothea hopes to nurture more medical students like Tean in the years to come and to give them the opportunity to learn and serve their fellow countrymen in need. In a decade or so, we aim to have health screenings run by Cambodian students themselves.

Our gratitude extends to the doctors who provided invaluable guidance on the ground, as well as International University, Khmer Foundation and KNGO for their heartening support. Overall, this trip was meaningful beyond measure, teaching us the importance of reaching out to our neighbours, cherishing what we have and seeking to give whenever we can. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

SAMANTHA FOO

Samantha has been playing the clarinet since the age of nine and is passionate about music. Also, she loves nature and always finds time to go on outdoor trips.

Legend

1. Geriatrician Dr Barbara performing an examination on a pregnant lady at one of the house visits in Sra Kaew
2. Project Sothea members training the KNGO youth volunteers for their subsequent health education lessons
3. A child at PCH II playing with one of our educational tools during the health screening