

VIETNAM

Through the Eyes of a Volunteer



No words can fully express my experience from my medical mission trip in Vietnam this past summer. The people I encountered every step of the way were wonderful, from the hostess and her family to the numerous volunteers on the mission trips. Vietnam is a stunning country with breathtaking scenery in part because of its unique terrain. I had the gracious opportunity to work on these mission trips through a sponsorship by Mai Nguyen and the Lửa Việt Youth Association. Some other charities that I volunteered with on these trips are Tu Ai Charity and Helping Hands. Through this trip, I had the chance to learn and cherish the art of medicine in this rapidly developing third world country. In addition, I have strengthened my knowledge of my native language, culture, and history. These are my personal accounts of my journey from Đà Nẵng to Cà Mau and everything in between.

As I cleared customs shortly after arriving in Saigon, I let go a big sigh. Now I wondered, “Where was the baggage claim?” Let us just say that you could not have missed it since the baggage personnel were throwing luggage all over the floor in two different baggage lanes; all very chaotic.

On the way out of the airport, I saw a sea of people crowding up against metal barricades waiting for their loved ones to arrive. I kept walking and pushing my luggage as I thought to myself, “How on earth am I going to find Thanh Thủy” I was relieved, however, when she spotted me immediately from my “distinct beauty marks.”

As we reached her house, I felt grateful inside that it was an American style house with a toilet inside. The three of us, Thu, Huynh and I, stayed up talking and getting to know each other until about four o'clock the next morning. Already, they had made me feel like home.

My first encounter with medicine came a day later. Thu brought me to Bệnh Viện Ung Bướu to meet Doctor Tuong Van. Immediately, I was surprised at how vast the hospital grounds were with several buildings and a large courtyard. It was naïve of me to even think that this country could not have the resources to build this and that people did not need oncology care. What saddened me most was seeing people waiting in the hallways and on the staircases for hours in the hot humid weather and poorly ventilated hospital buildings.





Doctors and nurses wore completely white outfits, which threw me off since I see a colorful array of scrubs in the hospitals here in the United States. Dr. Tuong Van gave us a tour of her floor first, which was for the adult oncology patients, and then of the hospital grounds.

I could not believe the conditions of the hospital rooms. The beds were twin-sized, hard, and usually had two or more patients sharing the space. Each room, a little bit smaller than the size of the average hospital room here in the States, held approximately four beds. When families visited, they usually sat on the floor. When there were a lot of patients and not enough beds, the patients lied on the ground, which was the case on the pediatric floor.

Afterwards, we sat in the conference room to listen to the residents' case studies presentations on Hepatitis A, B, C, D, and its Hepatitis markers. I also learned that most of the doctors speak at least two languages; Vietnamese and English. Most were also fluent in three languages, the third being French. I was very impressed by that! Throughout my trip in Vietnam, we used all three languages to try to communicate with each other when one of us could not get across a certain word in a language. I never thought that taking French in high school would ever come to use.

My first mission trip took me to Cà Mau, a city at the southern tip of Vietnam in the heart of the Mekong Delta. Traveling there

from Saigon took eleven hours by car. During this ride, I was hit with the realization that these people were really poor judging from their attire to the structure of their houses. It was also my first chance at conquering the technique of using the restroom over a tiny hole in the ground. Despite having had many chances to use the bathroom like this, I do not believe I ever got used to it.

Going through the Mekong Delta was very interesting. We went on ferries to cross the rivers and many bumpy bridges. In addition, when we got to Cà Mau, we needed to take a canoe for approximately an hour using the inter-coastal highway to our point of destination. I felt that I was going to fall into the Delta every time the boat shook from side to side. Instead of dwelling on my fear of drowning, I admired the scenery that laid before me. Amidst the marshlands, I noticed people fishing on their boats, even shopping for food on other boats, and some people getting into the water to set traps to catch shrimp. Looking at the boats in the distance and passing by our little canoe made me wish that it was my father who was in my shoes and not me. He has not had the chance to return to see his homeland since leaving in the late 1970s as one of the boat people.



We provided health care screening at a church in the middle of the Mekong Delta. Throughout the day, I assisted with the collecting and packaging of prescription medications for the poor after they had seen the doctors who were volunteering in the other room. The next day, we presented donated gifts to the children of the surrounding community. It was a wonderful sight to see how the children were so delighted to receive a gift, even as simple as candies and a balloon.

The people in this community that we served were very poor. Many of them had parasite infections that could have been prevented with basic needs. There in lies one of the primary problems. Some families cannot afford basics needs such as clothing and food. Some do not have shoes, which increases their risk of getting infected. In addition, the foods they eat are not clean enough. Even the hose at the church used to clean the dishes was spurting out leaves and dirt from the nearby stream.

The day after I returned from Cà Mau, I shadowed Dr. Tuong Van as she visited two orphanages to provide free health care. The first orphanage had about 20 children ranging from infants to toddlers. Most of the children were malnourished and some had viral infections. Doctor Tuong Van stressed the importance that doctors must be well versed in clinical signs and symptoms to diagnose

their patients since in Vietnam, not only does the hospital lack some of the resources available in the States, but also the people often do not have the money to afford health care. There were several things that touched me when I was here. First, Doctor Tuong Van made prescription orders out for drugs and for basic necessities such as milk, toothbrushes, toothpastes, and vitamins. (Can you imagine that order being made out in the States?) In addition, the care takers for this orphanage work second jobs to help pay the mortgage, food, and supplies for the orphanage. I was moved to hear that these people have big hearts to serve others in their community.

The next orphanage we went to had about 45 children and were run by nuns. We assessed and treated about a dozen patients, ranging from ages 17-30. This orphanage educated children who were blind mainly from birth, but there were some who suffered eye trauma later in life. Doctor Tuong Van talked about how the patients that she sees are very compliant. That was interesting to learn because here in the States, I feel that sometimes patients have compliant issues with their drug regimens.

My second medical mission trip brought me to Qui Nhơn, central Vietnam. Again I helped package prescription medications for the poor at a convent. The doctor volunteering with us, Ai, was able to use one of



the new buildings that the nuns had funded to build a clinic. The first level had living quarters for the doctor and treatment rooms and the second floor were for patients. The sad note is that the nuns have not been able to find a permanent doctor to come up to Qui Nhơn to serve the surrounding community.

The next day, we went to Đà Nẵng and did some tourist activities. First, we went to Trà Kiệu where the Virgin Mary appeared to the village 120 years ago. It was a beautiful monument placed on top of the hill overlooking the rice paddies. We stopped by a nearby convent for lunch, tasting mì quảng, a specialty cuisine of the region. After we had lunch, we went to Mỹ Sơn to visit the Champas most sacred site. The Champa were an Indianized kingdom that ruled for more than fourteen centuries in central and south Vietnam. Next, we went to Hội An to donate supplies to the children at another convent. While we were there, we walked around this gorgeous little town. After being in Vietnam for a little over two weeks, it was the first time I spotted tourists. Also, it was neat to be able to go into a tailor shop to observe the silk making process from the silk worms. The Japanese Covered Bridge in the heart of downtown is probably the most beautiful and interesting bridge I have ever seen. Mỹ Sơn and Hội An are cities both on the UNESCO's World Heritage list. In the evening, we stopped by Marble Mountains. Climbing the mountain was a challenge because the steps are about two to three times more vertical than the standard staircases here. The ascent, however, was definitely worth it. In the middle of the mountain, there is a passageway to actually go into the mountain. I was shocked at the enormity of the size of the cave. Inside the cave, there was a huge Buddha sitting in one of the sides of the cave. There were other altars there from other religious beliefs as well. All in all, the day was fun filled.

The third mission trip was to serve a village called Phu Thuong. We worked five hours

straight in the scorching heat, helping to package prescription medications for the 400 people who were seen and treated that day. The nuns rewarded us by providing us meal with fresh squid.

In Đà Nẵng, we had several shorter medical missions to attend to. Since Doctor Tuong Van flew in from Saigon, I was able to shadow her for the next few missions. We first stayed at the clinic provided by the convent to treat patients. Afterwards, we went to treat the elderly at a nursing home. We assessed and treated forty patients with various cases ranging from malnutrition, bladder infection, sciatic nerve compression, arthritis, and mitral insufficiency.

The next day, we went to Tam Kỳ, a two hour drive south of Đà Nẵng. The free healthcare screening took place in a school house. That day, we had at least ten doctors volunteering to help, making the 760 patients we needed to see and treat much easier. When looking at the people, I was getting home sick. The physical features of this community reminded me of my family back home. My heart went out to an elderly man as I watched him removing his wooden stick used for an artificial right leg to sit down across from us to get assessed. When he sat down, I also noticed that he wore a watch that was non-functional. Some cases that Dr. Tuong Van and I saw included a benign tumor near the spinal cord, hyperthyroidism, benign hypertrophy of the prostate gland, sinusitis, asthma, benign vascular disease, vestibular dysfunction, and autonomic nervous system dysfunction. Further, Dr. Tuong Van is a skillful physician with a generous heart. A man in his forties came in with an enlarged lymph node on his left side. After assessing him, Dr. Tuong Van suspected lymphoma. This patient was very poor and could not afford health care. She calmly disclosed to him the news that if it was lymphoma, he needed to seek treatment or the cancer would spread,



decreasing his lifespan. Then, Dr. Tuong Van went to a Lua Viet Youth Association Representative to ask for funding for this man. She was immediately approved and gave the man the funds, instructing him to meet her there in Saigon and she would be his doctor when she arrived. The dedication that Dr. Tuong Van showed towards her patients was a continuous reminder of the reason I am joining this profession.

A couple days later, I went on my final medical mission trip to Cam Ranh. During this trip, I assisted with measuring pulse pressure and blood pressure. This mission trip served 546 people medically and provided dental care for 150 people. It was amazing to see dentistry volunteers offering free dental services. In addition, 300 gifts of 1 kilogram of rice were provided to community members.

After returning to Saigon, I met Dr. Tuong Van again. We went to look at the two medical colleges in Saigon. The buildings had similar rooms to those in the States such as a large foyer, classrooms, and the auditorium. One course I would not want to take here is anatomy due to the lack of sufficient cooling power mixed with the chemical substances used to preserve the cadavers. We next took a tour around the University Hospital as well as the Heart International Hospital. The Heart International Hospital is the only specialized heart hospital in Vietnam and is owned by the French. Out of all the hospitals, this one was the nicest and very well kept.

Two days before I left to go home, I went to a couple museums to learn more about the

Vietnamese history, art, and culture. While at The Museum of Vietnamese History, I was able to attend The Vietnamese Water Puppetry. I have been waiting to see this type of art performance ever since I heard about it in high school. The performance completely met my high expectations. I also went to the Historical Museum of Vietnam and took a guided tour through the Reunification Palace as I gained more knowledge about the fall of the South during the Vietnam War. Later in the afternoon, I arrived at the



War Remnants in Vietnam Museum. Here, I had a glimpse at a side of the Vietnam War that I have never understood before. While I was looking at the exhibits and photographs, I thanked the Lord that my family safely

survived the tragic events that war often brings with it.

I have been very blessed to have been offered this opportunity. I immersed myself in the Vietnamese culture, expanding my Vietnamese vocabulary, learning the history, seeing her art, admiring the landscape, and practicing medicine. There is no doubt that I will use these experiences to be a better future physician to serve God and His people.

I would like to give special thanks to my parents, bà nội, bác Mai, chú Toàn, chi. Vân, Thanh Thu & Family, Des, and those who were not named for their endless love and support while I was in Vietnam. God Bless.

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