

Andrew-Hyun Lee - medical student from Sydney Medical School, awarded the Dr Carl Richard Jackson Scholarship, and undertook an elective at Hebron Hospital in 2018

I was privileged in having the opportunity to have my placement in Cambodia at the International NGO Hebron Hospital, situated on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, supported by the Dr Carl Richard Jackson Elective Term Scholarship. My elective term was certainly eye-opening, and a time for many firsts on my medical journey – including huge cancers left untouched for years, the death of an emergency baby patient with inoperable VSD, and living in a place for an extended time where the communication was difficult.

In my 8 weeks at the hospital, I was given the freedom to experience all aspects of the hospital, which ranged from general practice, outpatient cardiology, gastroenterology, and gynaecology clinics, as well as a small inpatient ward. Given the limited staff on the surgical ward, I was also able to scrub into various surgeries for a lot of hands-on experience. The most memorable patients for me (as well as the poorest) were the children with congenital heart disease. Most came in with severe dyspnoea and clubbed fingers and toes, and it was humbling to see them being given another breath at life after their surgery (cardiac surgery is provided for free by the hospital).



1 Open heart surgery at Hebron Hospital

Through my time there, I was able to gain a greater insight into the importance of clinical assessment and how to be prudent about the tests and therapies they could provide to some patients. I remember quite a few patients who would mention that they had only brought a dollar or two with them (something which would rarely happen in Australia!), prompting the doctor to reduce the number of investigations or treatments they could provide for the patient. Also, sometimes in spite of good access to facilities (such as a CT machine), lack of access to specialised staff (i.e. a radiologist), was also a challenge that the doctors faced.

Another experience that I greatly valued was going on medical outreach to rural areas where there is little access to health care. Over 4 days, I was able to join a team of doctors and staff to rural villages in Ratanakiri, a 10-hour drive from Phnom Penh. Here, the poverty and poorer health were immediately obvious – the children appeared stunted in growth, their faces appeared unwashed for months, while they were running and playing around even though it was during school time. Many were illiterate and could not even recognise the Arabic numerals on the Snellen chart. This was a really eye-opening experience about how much need there was in places like Ratanakiri. Of course, the health care provided was much



2 Patients lining up at a rural village in Ratanakiri province

less than ideal. However, it was the smiles of their faces as they left that showed me that the genuineness and loving care of the doctor was just as important as the PPI or antihypertensive they had prescribed.

A challenge that I constantly faced during the elective was the language barrier with the patients. Given the low level of education, most of the patients did not speak English and I was always challenged to find ways to communicate with them. When I was seeing patients, this would mainly be through a translator, but communication was slow and I did not always elicit all the information I wanted in the history. When I was asked to present a topic as a presentation, I found that what I thought was slow speech and clear articulation was still considered too fast for the Cambodian doctors to properly understand.

Over my 8 weeks there, I was also able to immerse myself in the Cambodian culture, which I realised was such a blend of so many different influences; including a mix of Buddhism, Hinduism, French culture, and the increasing Westernisation and American influence. I was also able to learn about the tragedies of the Khmer Rouge regime at the Killing Fields and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and also learnt that its impacts are still felt today when discussing this topic with the Cambodian doctors.

Overall, the elective has been such an incredible experience for me. I would like to thank the Jackson family for their generosity and support for this elective. Their continual support for the country of Cambodia is inspiring, and the priceless experiences I had will no doubt impact my role as a doctor in the future.