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As I walked into my first rounds with the medical staff at Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope in Phnom Penh Cambodia, a patient in the corner of the large room caught my eye. He was intubated, surrounded by family with one member gently squeezing the ambu bag. At first, I thought the family member was an employee, but then realized that each of the family members was taking turns “breathing” for the patient. All throughout rounds, I was waiting silently for someone to connect the endotracheal tube to a machine, but it never happened. The next day the scene was the same. No machine, just hands gently and methodically working. Another family member was squeezing the ambu bag. This was the first of my introductions to practicing medicine in Cambodia.

When I first learned about the Goldberg Reeder Travel grant, I read about it in a short blurb in one of the newsletters that I sometimes peruse over breakfast. It required that the person travel to a developing country as designated by the World Bank. I looked at the list and realized that I didn’t know much about any of the countries listed let alone any hospital outside of the United States. I then went online and looked at past newsletters from the American College of Radiology International Volunteer System hoping that I could find some guidance. I read an article with interest from Dr. Michael Paling. The article described his experiences in a hospital called Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope in Cambodia. Like me, Dr. Paling had been trained in general practice before becoming a radiologist. I completed a family medicine residency and practiced for about 10 years before becoming a resident again. The article included everything that I needed to know. The Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope was the only hospital in Cambodia that providing free care for the poor. It expected to have its first CT scanner installed that Fall. All the charts, lectures and rounds were conducted in English. Even weather, lodging, and safety were covered. I emailed Dr. Cornelia Haener, the physician listed at the end of the article hoping that she would email me back right away and she did. We plunged forth putting my application together. A few months later, I was thrilled to find that I received the travel grant. I emailed Grace Henry, the international volunteer coordinator who recommended and booked a local hotel. I had no worries, my trip was planned.

On my first day, Narin, the driver for the hospital, picked me up at my hotel exactly on time and brought me to the work. I watched with wonder through the window at the busy streets of Phnom Penh, vendors hawking their deals, monks in bright orange robes and large families loaded up on small motocycles. I was eager to get my first glimpse of the hospital. After my arrival, Lin, the daughter of the driver Narin, gave me a tour of the hospital, Dr. Vannarith, the head of the Department of Radiology welcomed me heartily. I found that he was always helpful and in good spirits. I also had the good pleasure of meeting, working with and learning from Dr. Paling, the physician whose article initially motivated me to come to Cambodia.

Every morning, I would round with the medical and surgical team. Each team had a large open ward that could hold approximately 15 inpatients each. As a radiologist on the team, I could see the patients and actually examine patients that would later on be scanned via ultrasound, x ray or CT. The physicians could present their clinical questions directly. I saw a variety of tropical diseases and advanced
presentations of disease. I saw Pott’s disease, tuberculosis, pneumocystis pneumonia, advanced metastatic cancer in young patients, liver disease from hepatitis, nematodes and other tropical diseases.

Since a CT scan was just installed prior to my arrival, I set forth setting up protocols. I gave lectures on the new protocols, plain radiographs and CT interpretation. There was also ultrasound teaching. Using knowledge from my past life as the director of the colorectal cancer screening program at Cook County Hospital, I also put together a cancer screening protocol as there was a plan for a women’s center to be opened in 2011.

The students and staff were eager to learn and were very appreciative of my efforts. I taught the entire department of radiology. Even the secretary, Neery, came to my lectures and asked me inquisitive anatomy questions.

As I was preparing my lectures, I also learned about the history of Cambodia. I also had time on the weekends to do some sightseeing. I visited Angkor wat, which had the largest pre-industrial civilization in the world and when the bus broke down coming back from my visit, I even taught the elementary school students anatomy using a game on my ipad. Another weekend, I visited the busy Ho Chi Min City (previously known as Saigon) via a $11-6 hour bus ride over the border.

The time went by very quickly. I was touched when the staff and students threw a party for me on my last day. They gave me a pretty good sized wooden Cambodian statue that I was luckily able to stuff into my luggage. We drank coke and ate traditional Cambodian snacks which were sweetened rice wrapped up in leaves.

I felt very sad about leaving and they all asked me when I would be back. I didn’t know when I would be back, but I know that it would eventually happen as I had fallen in love with the hospital and the people of Cambodia. I thought about the joys of teaching and the how the trip was definitely worthwhile and would not have been possible without the Goldberg Reeder travel grant. Although I was a volunteer, I was “paid” with appreciation and the satisfaction that I was doing something good and worthwhile. I am very grateful to the American College of Radiology for the opportunity to volunteer in Cambodia. The Goldberg Reeder Travel grant has made the start of my relationship with Cambodia possible and for that I am indebted. I hope to go back soon to the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope in Cambodia to continue what the Goldberg Reeder Travel grant has allowed me to start.

For further information, feel free to contact me at MLWANG@ALUM.MIT.EDU or visit the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope website www.sihosp.org. For further information from the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope staff, please contact annaobrien@sihosp.org or gracehenry@sihosp.org.