

By Mr Kok Yee Onn



500-year-old tree at Angkor Wat.

A Reflection on Project Lokun

All right I will be frank, I volunteered to do this article because I thought it was going to be easy and felt it would be a good opportunity to distill my reflections into writing, somewhat like a Dumbledore's pensieve for me to remember what I did, ages down the road. Not to mention that I could use it for *Pulse!*

But boy was I wrong. There were so many memorable experiences worth writing about. How can one bear to be the cruel executioner and omit certain memories not to be shared? Nevertheless, I shall attempt, in the economy I can afford, to share what we did, how I felt and hopefully convert you guys to CIP volunteering addicts and medical humanitarian junkies.

Project Lokun's approach is two-pronged: education and healthcare. For my batch, we went to primary schools to teach basic health education, even putting up a skit in Khmer that made the children roll over and laugh with our antics and poor enunciations. We also gave out goodie bags of toiletries for them to implement hygiene practices we taught. We even played traditional khmer games and taught them new Singaporean games. Throughout the many education trips, the common reward, to me at least, was the priceless joyful and happy smiles of all the kids. You could say it was a paediatrician's wonderland.

We also did pro bono clinics, which was the coup de Coeur (favourite) for me. It is a combination of helping people, brushing up



The class of kids whom we taught how to brush teeth.

on medical skills and having fun with friends. Seeing the needy sick, the grateful faces of helped patients and the poor state of general health reminded me daily of the medical ethos and kept me in focus of the right reasons of doing medicine. What was most amazing were the things we would not really get to see in Singapore: a floating village in a poorly sanitised environment and the organisation of a clinic in a floating church at the centre of it as well as an AIDS guy with Necrotising Fasciitis. We were also ill-equipped to handle diseases like scabies, Hand Foot Mouth Disease, genital warts and malnutrition.

Another unforgettable part is that of the friendship forged, especially when you spend over a week living with each other, and doing ridiculous things like rapping Linkin Park,



Mr Kok Yee Onn is a Year Two NUS YLLSOM medical student, who was involved in organising Project Lokun, a medical humanitarian trip to Pursat, Cambodia, with his peers. He views humanitarian trips as an amalgamation of how expertise can be aptly used to help people meaningfully, yet encompasses travel and experience of a different culture at the same time.



Chris giving out Vitamin Cs at the clinic.



Shooting AK-47s at a target range.



Raymond and Xinrong doing triage.



Cramped in the bus with all our medical supplies!

interacting with the locals or ‘bitching’ about why the doctors get to stay in hotels. We also made many Cambodian friends, ranging from the people in the catholic organisation we were working with to the translators. Without their help, the project would not have been such a success. I will always recall those days with fondness and they were fun because I did it with my friends, old and new.

In visiting Cambodia, as with visiting a new country, the experience of a new language, culture and unique sensories (smell, taste of food, sight) also add to the memories. In fact, in our Rest and Recreation segment, we managed to throng the streets of Phnom Penh and explore the ruins of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, which are two famous historical cities.

Having gone on a few CIP trips to places like Thailand and Vietnam, I feel that a medical humanitarian project like Project Lokun is one of the most suitable and salient thing a healthcare professional can do, as compared to building houses or wells. This is because it is putting your expertise and skills to good use. Furthermore, as

like some aid trips, Project Lokun strives to be sustainable in the long run with tangible long term benefits for the recipients. The importance of Project Lokun is perhaps made more poignant when you realise that this project has already helped hundreds of people and is on its way to becoming self-sustainable (we hire local doctors and intend to rent out buses when we do not use them). Also, the work you do is made even more meaningful when you realise that the developing Cambodia has barely recovered from the Khmer Rouge regime and is still plagued by obstacles like a high AIDS rate, low school-going rate for children and poor sanitation conditions: Obstacles a healthcare professional can definitely help with.

Why should you go? There is a plethora of reasons: adventure, getting out of one’s comfort zone, getting to help and interact with others and fun for example. You also benefit more than the recipient sometimes; for example I learnt to not take for granted the comforts we have and opened my eyes to the less fortunate. It was certainly a humbling experience for me.

Project Lokun is sustainable and growing. The positive returns have even made us want to extend our reaches. We also synergise with the local organisations to ensure our efforts are not wasted. May I add a parting thought to muse about: Life is composed of experiences and memories that flits by us quickly. So why not put it to good use?

Our project will be setting out for another two expeditions in June and December. In the current June trip, we aim to pilot a few initiatives. A “Clinic-on-wheels” programme where a doctor and two medical students, equipped with a simple pharmacy, would travel on an SUV into the remote villages, to provide door-to-door visits. Thus, the sick who are unable to travel to our clinics would not be neglected. Next, we are raising funds for “Project Lokun Ambulances”, to attend to acute emergencies, and also for ferrying patients to appropriate medical authorities for referral or long term treatment. Lastly, we are piloting a dental clinic and also a “Dental

Awareness Programme” to target school-going children. The programme aims to introduce tooth-brushing daily during recess time. We would follow up in December to assess the success of this initiative.

As of now, we are desperately short of funds to run our programme. Therefore, I would appeal to everyone out there to donate to our cause. Donations of any kind will be greatly appreciated. Donations can be made via a cheque addressed to **NUS Medical Society**. Please write “**Project Lokun**” on the back of the cheque. The mailing address for the cheque is:

**NUS Medical Society c/o the Dean’s Office
YLLSOM, NUS
10 Kent Ridge Crescent Singapore 119260.**

For me, every paragraph above was a gem of memory and an experience for my pensieve, which I would always recall with fondness.

Join us! ■