



Doing laundry on the rooftop



Volunteering in Kolkata, India

By Laura Loudres

I left the comforts of home to help make a difference in one of the poorest areas in India. Initially afraid and doubtful, I now know that it is the best decision I have ever made; one which has inspired me to be a better physician and a stronger person. I hope that my journey may similarly inspire you to take the path less well tread.

In April 2009, I went to Kolkata, India, to volunteer with the Missionaries of Charity, a non-profit organisation founded by Mother Theresa. It is run by the missionary nuns with the monetary support of donors, as well as volunteers, who stream in to help the nuns to care for the poor, the sick, and the dying.

Mother Theresa had come to Kolkata to work as a teacher in a local convent school. She saw that the poor had no place to live, no food to eat, and nowhere to go in times of illness. Many had come from the villages in hopes of a better life; but in a big city like Kolkata, earning a living is not easy. Disturbed by the surrounding poverty, she decided to take matters into her own hands and went into the slums to tend to the needs of the destitute and starving. The government

was not able to provide for them and in the end, she became their only hope. After some months, she was joined, one by one, by her former students.

Today, the Missionaries of Charity have homes all around the world, including Singapore. In Kolkata they have 6 homes – Nirmala Shishu Bhavan for toddlers, another for orphans and disabled children up to the age of 12, Daya Dan for those aged between 12 to 18 years old, Prem Dan for adults who are unable to fully care for themselves, Nirmal Hriday in Kalighat (the first home established, and its name means ‘soft heart’) for the sick and dying destitute where I volunteered at, as well as other centres. They also run several dispensaries across the city where the poor come in to seek treatment for various ailments.

My first challenge was getting accustomed to Kolkata. I had arrived in the peak of summer when the average temperature was 42°C and shared a flat with a few other volunteers that only had basic amenities. There were many power cuts throughout the day and we had to deal with water rationing – this meant no fans half the time and only short, cold showers. Thankfully the food was decent although I still suffered from gastroenteritis twice during the trip. But once I recovered, I actually started enjoying myself – India is truly fascinating and there are no words to describe the sights, sounds, and smells. To the foreign eye, the city may be a mass of chaos, yet one would be surprised at the orderly way everyone goes about their business.



Nirmal Hriday

Volunteers come from all corners of the world and range from ages 18 to 70 years old. Most are young adults travelling in Asia who would stop by to contribute and use this opportunity to meet other travellers. Skills are not a prerequisite for volunteering. The registration for volunteers takes place three afternoons per week and all that is needed are a passport and as Sr. Karina (in charge of the volunteers) says, a loving heart and willing hands. You could volunteer for a day, or even forever; don't be surprised that some do! I met a Dutchman who has been there for seven years and a Taiwanese lady who plans to spend the rest of her life volunteering, if only to mention a few.

I chose to volunteer at Nirmal Hriday because as an internist, I thought I would be of most use there. The home houses approximately 100 inpatients and is divided into male and female wards. The female volunteers were designated to care for the females and vice versa. When I was not attending to the patients who were brought in from the dispensaries, I would join the other volunteers in the chores such as feeding the patients, doing laundry, dishes, and cleaning the home.

I must say that being a doctor in a hospice in Kolkata was the most challenging point of my career. There was



Female ward at Nirmal Hriday

little access to laboratory investigations, and the drugs available were very limited. More distressing still was the fact that I could hardly communicate with my patients. Sadly, neither could the other volunteers as being of diverse international origins, none of them spoke much Bengali. Nevertheless, with some help from the local people at the home, I managed to diagnose and treat heart failure in a patient who had (wrongly) been getting treatment for asthma and another with pulmonary tuberculosis – both improved thereafter.

Unfortunately not everyone had a happy ending. In my three weeks of service, I was called to see two young men who were terminally-ill. They clearly needed urgent admission to the intensive care unit; however the Sister-in-charge refused to send them to the hospital. The reason was that even today, the poor have no room in the local hospitals if they cannot afford to pay. Previous attempts for similar cases had led to them being discharged within a day to die on the streets. So, we were forced to keep them comfortable, and then watch them die.



Mother House

To describe the experience as frustrating is an overwhelming understatement.

Despite the setbacks, I had an enriching experience as a volunteer in Kolkata. I grew to love this new city, with its many amazing people and interesting culture. It felt good to be able to make a bit of a difference. I feel so fortunate to have been born in a developed country and to have received an education; also to have caring friends and family, good health, as well as a future to look forward to. We are often so caught up with the material things of life, such as examinations and promotions that sometimes we forget to stop and count our blessings. The lesson to learn from our brothers and sisters in Kolkata is that perhaps, as William Davies eloquently put it, we should take time to stand and stare, at a life which may otherwise have been full of care. *Carpe diem* my friends! **SMA**

For more information on volunteering, please go to www.moherteresa.org



I am Laura Lourdes; I was trained in Internal Medicine with the NHG, and am now working with the Johns Hopkins International Medical Centre, Singapore. I graduated from Penang Medical College in 2005 and have been practising in Singapore since.