



Medical Relief Mission to Padang Earthquake



The TTSH team together with families, at the sending off.



Dr Ong examining a patient after his operation.

By Dr Ong Kah Chuan

Many from as far as Singapore felt the earth shake for a couple of minutes on the evening of 30 September 2009. Shortly after, news spread that an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale had struck off the coast of western Sumatra, causing massive destruction to the city of Padang. Scenes of destruction and casualties being carried away from the rubble flashed across television screens.

Within 24 hours of the earthquake, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) received an urgent request for volunteers as part of a surgical team to help with the relief effort of a combined SAF-TTSH expedition. The team was quickly assembled comprising seven members from TTSH to augment the surgical group from SAF. The mission was launched in less than 48 hours of the notification.

Upon arrival, we were deployed to Pariaman, a town about 53km from Padang, which was nearer to the epicenter of the quake. The SAF team moved swiftly to link up with the local hospital and within hours of reaching, we were discussing about patients who required surgery together with the local



A patient discharging to go home after treatment.

Indonesian doctors. The main building of the hospital was still intact and they warmly welcomed and thanked us for our assistance. We also worked very closely with the local NGOs who were from other parts of Indonesia and Malaysia.

The conditions of the wards and operating facilities were dilapidated. There were no operating table lights in our operating room and we had to resort to wearing headlamps to see during operations. The electricity supply was also unreliable and we even experienced a blackout halfway through an operation!

Our typical day in the operating room was about 12-hours long, dealing with fractures of the upper and lower limbs. In the 11 days we were there, we performed more than 40 surgeries. Our patients were mostly elderly who had trouble escaping their falling homes during the quake.

While in Pariaman, we received warnings of possible earthquakes striking the area again and were told to sleep in tents instead of buildings. Some aftershocks were felt on another occasion while we were there.

After 11 days, with the number of patients requiring surgeries declining and life returning to normalcy, we left for home. There were teary farewells from the patients we had treated. The SAF team stayed on for a couple more days to wrap things up.

We are indeed lucky that Singapore is sheltered from natural disasters. It is truly admirable how the Indonesians bounced back after having their homes destroyed overnight. SMA



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