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Full Scholarship recipient



I would like to thank CFHI for giving me the opportunity to experience service learning in every meaning of the word

WEEK 1

PEOPLE AND PLACES

My first impression was surprisingly a very pleasant one because there were a few familiar things I could associate with (like the crowd, the pace of life, etc.)

During my first week, there were quite a few times I almost or actually got lost but thanks to hospitality of the population and the availability of rickshaws, I always found my way back. Actually getting lost was fun for me because I got to see parts of Mumbai I would not have seen otherwise.

HOSPITAL AND CLINICAL ROTATIONS

We were at the Acworth Leprosy hospital this week. I was stunned to find out that the inmates of the hospital ran everything from dressing wounds, cleaning the hospital, working in the small shoe factory, etc except off- course the jobs of the doctors and nurses.

I was impressed by the method India employs in dealing with stigma-associated diseases like leprosy, AIDS and TB. They effectively integrated these diseases departments into their general hospitals so that people were encouraged to seek diagnosis and treatment without felling unnecessarily labeled by having to go to special hospitals. This concept, I believe, is responsible for fast results seen in the elimination of these diseases in the public health sector of India.

We also went to 2 other clinics (Dr. Mhatre and Mehta's). One of them was incredibly small but unbelievably functional. It was located right in the heart of Dharavi, Asia's biggest slum and diseases ranged from cases of viral infections, conjunctivitis, abscesses, herpes infections to extra

pulmonary TB amongst others. I noticed that patients didn't pay much attention to illnesses that were not incapacitating therefore only late stages were presented in the clinics.

The 2nd clinic was interesting, we got to examine patients, diagnose, give shots and get a taste of real doctor-patient relationships where patients travel for as much as an hour just to come and see their doctor with whom they have developed a relationship over the years.

Everybody asked for shots, which was interesting considering the fact that I personally dislike taking injections so we had combinations of vitamins and painkillers for people who didn't need anything but wanted something.

We met a woman with XDR TB who had been infected for 9 years and was now on 3rd line drug treatment with Capreomycin and had started recover. I did not notice any stigma towards her by her family or the doctors (unlike what it is in Baku and Nigeria) and fortunately their lungs were all clear.

FESTIVALS

04/09- Krishna's birthday – Human pyramids were mounted in order to get money pots hanging on phone lines in the middle of the street. Unimaginable excitement, noise and traffic jam.

WEEK 2

PEOPLE AND PLACES

We were at Panvel (a fishing village) and we stayed at this naturally beautiful place called Shantiville. A safe haven for leprosy patients who were not allowed to live among the community and now lived there with their children and grandchildren. There were other people with illnesses like schizophrenia that were also excluded from the community so they came there to live. Some other people just wanted a break from the noisy life so they came to experience the peace and quiet of Shantiville

Challenges of the trip to Panvel that might be useful for future participants

1. *The accommodation is close to a river so there are bugs a lot more than what you will see in town. So bring along with you all the insect repellants you got for the program and don't make the mistake of leaving it like we all did. (This is the place it will really be useful)*
2. *Electricity goes off in the evenings so bring along a flashlight and if you have a handy fan, it will be useful as well.*
3. *Bring with you something to keep you busy like a book or movie because you are 20km from the city and you won't see anything urban around you.*
4. *Your mobile phones won't work so inform your family so that they are not worried.*
5. *Discover the river on the first day because it is an awesome place to relax after clinic everyday.*

HOSPITALS AND CLINICS

The first clinic we went to (a primary health center) was a 2-hour drive. It served the populace of 35 villages surrounding it. The doctor didn't seem too keen about us or the patients, despite that everyone showed him great respect. I would not say it was the best part of my trip.

Apart from the health center, we went to a dermatologist who taught us a lot. The clinic was impressively technologically equipped for such a small place like Panvel. We also went to a GIT surgeon who ran a hospital. I saw a very interesting case of pilodnia sinus for the first time.

Lastly, we were at Dr. Gune's clinic (huge place).

Dr. Gune admits an average of 1000 people a day and works till whenever patients stop showing up. Awesome experience. The trip made all participants so close that we felt like brothers and sisters from different parents by the end of the week.

WEEK 3

PEOPLE AND PLACES

I made a friend from India at the end of the last week and we hung out a lot this week. She took me to a church where I met quite a number of people.

The Ganesh festival also started this week (16/09). The streets and beaches were filled with people immersing Ganesh statues of all sizes into water. Apart from that, not much happened this week. I was pretty happy by how smooth the transition from the scary first week to the awesome second week was.

HOSPITALS AND CLINICS

BSES hospital was definitely a highlight of the program. Managed by a spiritual organization, the “Brahmi Kumaris”, the hospital indeed treated patients like whole entities so that they not only met their physical needs but also their spiritual as well as financial needs. We all loved the place.

I definitely had a great chance for service here because we were granted unlimited access to all the wards. I spent a lot of time in the children’s ward talking with kids who had cleft palates and lips and their parents. I also talked with a few patients on dialysis, OPD patients and doctors. For the first time, I saw an oral verrucous cancer, which was caused by some local thing that people chew on and that is pretty popular in India (similar to tobacco).

Dr. Mehta Ashok, the oncology surgeon and director of the hospital showed remarkable leadership ability working with a team of young doctors (dentists, facial surgeons etc), totally approachable and friendly man yet with an aura around him that keeps you in check. For the first time, I saw a doctor I would definitely like to be like.

BSES contributes outstandingly to the community there with their free cleft repair surgeries for children. We saw a few of them and the precision these surgeries require is beyond description. They actually do not only do the surgeries but they take the kids through dental reconstruction and speech therapy totally free. I salute BSES hospital for taking steps to offer children a chance to live a normal life free of charge.

My clinical highlight of the week was the visit to an NGO “Humsafar Trust” connected with the HIV control program in India. It was an experience indeed.

WEEK 4

PEOPLE AND PLACES

The program went by so fast and I was sad to be leaving at the end of the week. I made great friends, met good people and learnt new things.

India won the cricket world cup this week and even the doctor we worked with was watching the match with his patients who were happy to wait until the match was over, it felt so natural. A day after the cricket match was the final day of Ganesh festival. The excitement and noise of the week was inconceivable.

HOSPITAL AND CLINICS

We were at two clinics for the most part of the week. Evening clinics were very useful. I had hands-on experience at Dr. Bathla’s and his mum (also a doctor) taught us everything there is to

know about Malaria. A very clean clinic and friendly as well, the patients all seemed like family members of the doctor's family.

On the last day, we were at a Leprosy dispensary run by Dr. Bhatki, the co-coordinator for the Mumbai program. It was the most effective clinic I had seen through out my stay in India.

If there was anything I gained from this program, it was definitely the fundamental information given to us about Leprosy, which helped me get rid of the fear I had for leprosy-infected individuals before I got to India.

By the last day of the program, I was examining lesions and palpating swollen nerves of infected patients with absolutely no fear of getting the disease.

Among other things, we saw how paraffin waxing could markedly reduce stiff joints so that patients could go in for corrective cosmetic and nerve decompression surgeries.

The dispensary not only diagnosed leprosy cases but also made differential diagnoses and sometimes treatments for other lesions.

The surrounding community members, young and old made use of the clinic without any shame and that was remarkable.

In summary, I would like to say that first of all, you should have the right attitude towards your co-participants because you will need each other's help during the program.

Secondly, it is important that though you have expectations, you keep your mind open so that you are prepared for new things that do not include your preconceptions about the program.

Thirdly, although it is really cheap to live in India, you might find yourself spending a bit more than you intend to because there is so much to buy, so many places to see, so many rickshaw drivers who will take you on a 10-km drive instead of 2km because you do not know any better. Lastly, the food is really only vegetarian, which you might not have come to terms with and it is spicy (I mean as far as buying juice and finding out that there is masala in it). So get ready for a food adventure!!

In all, it was one of the most interesting places in the world where wealth and poverty meshes like an entangled twig and people love you maybe because you are foreign or maybe because you are you.

Thanks again to CFHI for an opportunity of a lifetime.