

To India and Back

So often I was told that my internship in India would teach me something about myself and that my views on the world would change. As many times as someone said this to me, it couldn't have experienced it until I left the comforts of what I knew, and forced myself into the unknown. In the beginning, I often found myself truly uncomfortable. It wasn't just living out of a suitcase, switching towns every week, or not knowing if the electricity would work that night. It was the social and cultural differences separating me from Indians that was so difficult to overcome. Miraculously, by the end of my journey, I actually felt that I had found a niche for myself in Indian culture. That realization was one of the most rewarding for me.

The first day of clinical was my glimpse into many types of emotions I would have along my trip. I began in Mussorie at Landour Hospital. This hospital, interestingly enough was Christian based, which had chapel services every morning. My friend Laura and myself are both agnostic and moderately liberal, so it was an interesting and challenging experience to sit through the service when the pastor would speak about certain topics. I felt a general hostility toward American Christianity especially when discussing homosexuality. The pastor discussed with the audience that in America, some sects of Christianity allow pastors to have homosexuals in their fellowship as well as letting some "even become pastors!" He claimed this was morally wrong and a sin in God's eyes.

In addition, several days after we arrived in India, it became legal to be openly homosexual. In response to this, the pastor wished that he could, "stand on the top of the tallest mountain and shame India for being so disgraceful." I truly couldn't believe what

I was hearing. I held myself back from the urge to scream and yell, knowing that it would not reflect well upon my internship program as well as myself. I was heated about this for several hours before I finally let it go. I understood that I was visiting a culture that was not as open with self-expression and individuality as America. Still, it was hard to accept that areas in the world discourage these things so strongly. This experience was the first real slap in the face that made me sure I was no longer in the United States.

As for the rest of my first day in the hospital, it was a bit overwhelming. I had no idea how many patients were seen in and OPD in India. I am sure that I sat there and listened to at least 100 different patients discuss their issues with the doctors. It was so structurally different than the US. We are so organized in the states. How do you see a doctor in America? You set an appointment in advance and show up on the day and time written on a card for you. All of your previous health records are kept on computer file for each physician to view personally. And, if you miss your appointment, then you reschedule. If you don't like one doctor's opinion, then you seek another. In India, no appointment is made. Traditionally, you and at least one family member, if not all, travel numerous kilometers sacrificing a day's wages from the rice patty fields. Hopefully your health issue isn't too debilitating so you can make it out of the hills and to the hospital by a small dirt path. Then, you wait all day in a small room hoping that a doctor can decipher your obscure paining abdomen from the person sitting next to you. You keep all of your own medical records, most often in a reused old plastic bag. The doctor makes a diagnosis and whatever they have decided is your only answer. There are often times no second opinions. There isn't time or space for this unless it is a truly serious condition that can't be treated at the local hospital. This was amazing to me. The efficiency and

speed of Indian hospitals were unlike any health setting I have ever experienced. And, I believe that in the majority of cases, the competency of the physicians and the facilities was just as good if not better than America's.

My typical clinical day started with breakfast provided by my host family. In Dehradun, my friend Laura and I were grouped together. We visited about 2 clinics daily. The majority of the time we watch patients enter the OPD. Several times we got to see surgeries and in the rural areas we conducted ear, nose, and throat checkups on young school children. In Pune, each week we would visit a different clinic mostly based on maternal and child health. Several times we visited slum areas, touring the slums and observing local OPDs there. We also watched surgeries and births both natural and cesarean sections. On our second to last week in Pune we got to visit and laparoscopy clinic. That was the most amazing site of my entire trip. The amount of surgeries we were allowed to watch and the talent of the surgeons there was amazing. In Dehradun I was usually in clinics until 5:30 or 6pm. In Pune, clinic ended earlier, usually around 2 or 3pm...

...It was several of the physicians I met that made the professional aspect of this internship worthwhile. Through my observation of their passion for medicine and their determination for excellence, I found a deeper understand of my own hopes in healthcare. Before I came to India, I had an ambition to be a nurse or possibly a nurse practitioner. I wasn't exactly sure of the field I wanted to enter, but I knew I did not want to become a doctor. However, after seeing many surgeries and listening to doctors discuss different techniques for certain procedures, I knew what I wanted to pursue. I knew that nursing was not enough of a challenge and that I wanted to be in the operating room cutting,

suturing, and cauterizing to ultimately heal people from the inside out. I learned that it is the challenge of the job and the uncertainty of the outcome in surgery that makes it so exciting for me. I have now decided, purely because of this internship, that I will pursue becoming a surgical physicians assistant. Not only has my clinical experience pushed me to decide on a more rewarding career path, but it has also solidified my interest in international medicine. I enjoyed seeing the resourcefulness that doctors used when supplies were limited. The differences in the medical environment outside of the United States were refreshing, and fast-paced. I feel as though I have been privileged to intern in the presence of the doctors I worked with. I hope that one day I may work beside them. For me, that was one of the most rewarding experiences.

Though healthcare was impressive in some cases, it did present my biggest challenge. Witnessing the gender inequality in Indian culture was perplexing. It was difficult for me to watch women enter the hospital with diseases and illnesses that should have been treated months earlier if it wasn't for their cultural standards being what they were. The woman's role in many Indian families, including modern ones, is to be submissive to the husband, and to take care of the family at all times. If a woman feels abdominal pain, she may wait for months to go to a doctor because her health is not valued as much as her children's or her husband's. If a woman wants to do anything, she must first ask her husband. No choice can be made without his approval. Of course this was not the case 100% of the time, but I frequently witnessed women hiding passively behind their husbands and his decisions. Even my medical director told me that was the way his family was run. Many of my other challenges I was able to handle, but this one especially effected me...

...What I would have liked to know before I arrived in India was a more detailed schedule of what I would be doing. Before I arrived, I really had no clue about how the clinical rotations would work. It would have been helpful if there could have been an example itinerary. Other than that, I think all the preparations were sufficient. I think that the best way to get to know the country you are in is to accept being unprepared for most of the things that will happen to you. That is the reason we decide to take adventures like this in the first place. If we were ready for everything that another country had to offer, then it wouldn't be a learning experience and wouldn't force us to grow and accept change.

My best advice to any intern is to be open to everything that may come your way. In my experience, some of the most horrifying, disgusting and uncomfortable moments are the ones that I remember and cherish the most now. Without those trials, I would never have tested my tolerance, never have laughed so hard, and never have learned as much about myself.