



## **Volunteering in Cambodia**

### **BOOK REVIEW**



By George Meyer, MD

AWAKENING HIPPOCRATES, A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GLOBAL HEALTH SERVICE, ISBN: 1-57947-673-2, O'Neil EO, Jr, AMA, Chicago, IL, 2006, Price: \$34.95 and \$39.95.

Health Volunteers Overseas has several programs available to volunteer physicians, nurses (especially nurse educators), and other allied medical teachers. In January 2006, we traveled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, where I volunteered at Sihanouk Hospital Center for Hope. Cambodia, with a decades-long history of continuous warfare, has only been at peace since 1995. It is struggling, with the help of many countries and many non-government organizations, to enter the 21st Century.

Sihanouk Hospital Center for Hope is a small facility, supported by Hope Worldwide. It gives free outpatient medical care. Any patient previously seen is eligible for care. Each weekday there is a lottery to see new patients. Around 200-300 potential patients come to the daily lottery from which 10 names are selected. Those not chosen go away and return another day to try their luck.

There are two wards with about 12 beds each, one for medical problems and one for surgical problems. Most of the medical care is given by Cambodian physicians. Basic surgery was offered by local surgeons with backup and support by "expatriate" surgeons from the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

Everyone at the hospital is learning a language. The Cambodians learn English and the expats learn Khmer. The hospital is focused on team building so everyone is pleased to try learning the others' language. When English speakers are visiting, rounds are in English.

The hospital has a rotating training program for physicians, similar to a rotating internship except that some of the doctors have already been in practice for several years. I think the hospital uses this program not only to recruit docs for their staff but also to help improve the quality of medical care for the nation. They try to retain the best physicians for their staff, letting the others go back to practice in other locations.

I gave daily 30-minute lectures in my area of specialty each morning, visited the municipal hospital next door and made daily rounds at the Sihanouk hospital. In two weeks at the hospital I saw hyperthyroidism, several cases of rheumatic heart disease, three cases of typhoid (one was resistant to ceftriaxone), a probable polio, lots of diabetes and hypertension. The more senior physicians (in their late 30s - anyone who could read and write was killed during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror) were quite competent. When I made rounds, I tried to help them develop good differential diagnoses.

The people were wonderful. They worked hard, they smiled, and they craved learning. There are a lot of interesting things to do in and around Phnom Penh as well as the necessary weekend visit to Siem Reap and Angkor Wat (see photo, inside back cover). My wife taught English for the two weeks of our visit in Phnom Penh at a grammar school run by Hope Worldwide. We had a wonderful time and look forward to a return visit in

the next couple of years.

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