

Mobile Education in Cambodia

Cameron R. Nelson

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to spend several unforgettable days volunteering at a mobile dental education clinic that visited remote villages in the Cambodian jungles and taught children about proper dental hygiene. My time with the dentists was spent serving the villages near the small city of Siem Riep in north-central Cambodia. Despite the city's proximity to the most popular tourist destination in Cambodia – Angkor Wat – this area was one of the poorest in the country.

I was in the middle of a one year around the world backpacking trip and was there as a volunteer with my friend Tessa from England to help volunteer dentists wherever they needed us. Tessa loved this kind of in-your-face getting to know the locals sort of volunteer work. The year before, she had distributed Christian pamphlets and videos in Tibet. This was at the risk of imprisonment or death due to strict Chinese anti-proselytizing regulations.

I got a ride with the volunteer dentists from my hotel in Siem Riep early in the morning, and by the time we setup at an elementary school 20 miles away, I was exhausted. Because the villages we served were all so remote and the state of public transportation in that part of Cambodia horrendous, the only way the majority of the locals could get affordable, modern healthcare was if it came to them.

The mobile clinic was setup in a classroom of a small elementary school. I spent the first part of the day wearing thick rubber gloves cleaning dental tools in a solution of chemicals so that they could immediately be reused on other patients. While I scrubbed blood and grime off of shiny metal instruments, an endless stream of kids, no older than nine years old, came and went from the clinic. They came from the countryside, where dental hygiene and even the sight of a toothbrush, was alien to them.

At the school for only six days, they had treated over 150 orphaned children. The clinic was funded by the Baptist Outreach Program out of Utah, and staffed by international volunteers like myself. The team of professional dentists pulled teeth and filled cavities, all the while giving lessons to the



kids about dental hygiene. Their strategy was to alleviate the most suffering they could with their limited funds. Accordingly, the program carefully planned their route and contacted local authorities ahead of time to let them know when they would be there.

Due to their creed of helping the maximum number of souls, they only had enough Novocain to use on the children getting teeth pulled out; the ones getting fillings had to bear with the pain. And bear with it they did. Not once did I hear screaming or wailing from the numerous children lying supine on their backs.

One of the dentists called me over and asked me to shine a flashlight into a little girl's mouth as he pulled out two of her rotten teeth. Though it must have hurt terribly, the girl was as quiet and as still as a mouse. After the dentist was done, the girl very respectfully put her hands together in front of her heart in the traditional Cambodian way of greeting and thanks. As soon as she got off the chair and walked out into the bright sunlight outside, another girl immediately came in and took her place.

Tessa and I, with the help of some of the local teachers, launched into a dental hygiene demonstration, complete with posters in Cambodian and larger than life false teeth and a tooth brush we used to demonstrate proper brushing techniques. For the next several hours, the 80 or so kids sitting in the dusty playground of their school paid her the utmost attention and never once took their eyes off of her to hit each other or talk to their neighbor; a level of

discipline almost unheard of in American elementary schools.

After the demonstration, toothbrushes and toothpaste were supplied to everyone, even the teachers and local villagers. These dental hygiene products were donated by charitable organizations in the United States, and in many cases this was the first time they had ever been used in the villages.

During a short break in the busy day, I had a talk with the director of the Baptist Outreach Program in Cambodia. He told me about some other programs that were currently underway in this area. These programs included digging wells in 15 villages to provide 8,000 people with clean water, donating wheelchairs to local hospitals, and handing out eye glasses, in addition to their mobile dental clinic, which is always on the move, week after week, going to poor rural village after village.

Most of the children in rural parts of Cambodia have never brushed their teeth in their lives. The children who came in to get their teeth pulled today never knew who paid for it. They never knew that donations to a church in the United States paid for the tools that helped pull their teeth and fill their cavities. The education these children received would prevent them from following in their parents' footsteps and eating with cavity-stricken teeth for most of their adult lives.



About the author

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