

A reflection on the charitable mission with the VNMAP Team which provided diagnoses, treatment, and medicine for the indigent minorities in the rural areas of Khanh Hoa and Lam Dong Provinces in the summer of 2008.

Foreign Gold to Vietnam

In a materialistic world, gold, alongside the dollar, are considered the most valuable of all currencies; the more people possessed, the wealthier they are perceived to be, and are more capable of receiving the status of the so-called fortunated, famed, and prosperous. The gold in which this writing cites is neither the shiny SJC, nor the PNJ, nor the 9999 gold. The gold I am referring to is priceless; this gold cannot be sold nor traded. This priceless gold is comprised of "caring hearts," of selfless medical professionals of the APAMSA (Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association), and of the selfless medical students who are better recognized as "Foreign Gold" to the poor people of Vietnam. VNMAP (Viet Nam Medical Assistant Program) is a group within APAMSA whose mission is to diagnose, treat, and dispense medicine to the poor people of Vietnam. There is a special focus on the minorities of the Central Highlands who live in remote villages under extreme poverty and lack adequate access to proper medical treatment and have little or no knowledge of nutrition and hygiene. As a result, these people are exposed to potentially fatal diseases.

Through different sources of information such as media and words of mouth from friends and relatives, I found out that there were many charity groups from in and out of the countries who also organized mission trips to provide support to rural areas of Vietnam. They provide medical care and supports for the people, and some groups even perform on spot surgery for the poor residents. That is the "Priceless domestic-foreign Gold" that I am talking about, and all of those help are well-respected and worthy to be mentioned. Besides, it would be a mistake if we forget to give thanks to the countless unnamed others who took the less fortunate under their "wings" even though they themselves do not possess anything valuable. They neither expect anything in return, nor ask for any acknowledgement for their good deeds. Their actions speak on their own.

The two-week mission trip with VNMAP in June has left me with many unforgettable memories and provided me the chance to see the beauties which life still offers. Because of such wonderful experience and unforgettable memories I am compelled to record my personal reflections about this trip. Hope that it be a spiritual gift, an encouragement and a sincere thank-you from myself to each member of the VNMAP group.

It was the second time the VNMAP group organized a charity trip to Vietnam. After a year of planning and preparation, the 17 day trip began at 6 AM on June 6, 2008 from Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) to predetermined locations in rural provinces. The night before departure, the group held a meeting with all of its members to finalize the trip. It was also an opportunity for members to meet in person and get acquainted with each other. Most VNMAP members had only been in contact with each other via e-mail, conference calls, or chat rooms. This is due to their conflicting schedules and their proximity to one another. By coincidence, I learned about the VNMAP group through my relatives and was honored to be chosen as their representative in Vietnam. My role in the VNMAP mission was that of a tour guide and interpreter for the group as they carried out their mission.

The group consists of 18 members including myself. Within the group, there is one doctor, two pharmacists, and the remainders are medical students and volunteers whose ages range from 20 to 50 years old.

The last mission to Vietnam in 2007 was only to the Dien Khanh District of Khanh Hoa Province. VNMAP diagnosed and treated the people at the hospital thanks to sufficient resources and manpower. But, this year, VNMAP had extended its services to a neighboring province. The group had to travel to different locations each day in Nha Trang City and Khanh Vinh District, and worked continuously for five days. The constant work exhausted every member, but it did not make them any less enthusiastic about providing proper health care to the poor.

After five busy days serving 2 villages in Nha Trang City and 3 villages in Khanh Vinh District (in Khanh Hoa Province), it was realized that the number of patients served exceeded the permitted capacity. At Tung Nghia Village (Duc Trong District of Lam Dong Province), the situation was not meliorated. The group served over 200 patients, exceeding the number stated in the agreement with the authorities,

within the first 3 days. Working in Tung Nghia, nevertheless, had an advantage due to the independent mobility of the patients, which tremendously reduced the travel time for the group. Blessed by the smooth cooperation, the group got a chance to retreat to Dalat City, the provincial capital, each afternoon for sightseeing, relaxation and regeneration.

Prior to arriving at the municipalities, VNMAP had signed agreements with the local governments of the above mentioned provinces. Through our request, the health departments had assigned additional doctors, nurses and volunteers to the communal health centers. Initially, the local doctors cooperated quite well despite their moderate number. Unfortunately, a setback shortly surfaced due to the patients' preference toward foreign doctors (who were perceived as better trained than local doctors). A significant number of patients insisted on seeing VNMAP "doctors," even though they had to spend more time waiting. The indigenous people could not differentiate between the VNMAP doctor and medical students and assumed every VNMAP member, including myself, was a doctor. The patients perennially praised the VNMAP members who conducted themselves professionally with thorough examination, welcoming gestures, sincerity and friendly dispositions. Such expressions unintentionally inclined the local health care providers to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. Consequentially, many of them lost their enthusiasm and discreetly deserted their posts. This was a subtle, yet sensitive issue, since they also needed empathy and pride in their profession. Meanwhile, Dr. Tan and the members of the VNMAP team were being exhausted with the workload; many of them did not have time for a break and/or lunch. Taking the psychological implications into consideration and with much persuasion on the importance of the mission which could possibly not succeed without their collaboration, I was able to mediate the doctors back to the clinic.

I assisted the group by doing menial chores such as channelizing the patients and facilitating the local government agents with the clinic arrangements. Through such role, I was able to observe and admire the compassion in which Dr. Tan and the crew of medical students had for their patients. Despite the harsh heat, the overcrowding and the exhaustion, each and every member of the team always greeted his/her patients with a smile and cordial gestures. What the VNMAP team accomplished in their mission has left a Hippocratic image of a doctor in the minds of their patients - one that understands, sympathizes, and cares for his patients as if they were his own family. According to Dr. Tan, "Even though we did not have the capability to treat all of their illnesses, our presence reaffirmed to the local people that they are not forgotten, that there are still people in the world who care about them, and I'm sure they feel comforted and invigorated - physically and spiritually." The comment by Doctor Tan is reminiscence of a meaningful song which I had sung in the distant past:

So many beautiful things surround us
The tolerance, the sacrifice, and the humane
Beauty is sometime in a smile
A handshake, a welcoming gesture...

Indeed, in this scrambled and fast paced world, we are guarded and tend to forget to express genuine human sentiments toward one another. We draw a blank when it comes to friendly gestures, avoid the sympathetic glance, and forget to aid the less fortunate. Such thoughts gravely trouble me when some doctors in Vietnam forget to abide by the Hippocratic Oath that they swore to in order to become doctors. They treat their less fortunate patients with little empathy, with little understanding, and at times, with no respect. It is unfortunate that the poor people of Vietnam do not get the proper medical treatment or the understanding from doctors in their own country.

As I sit down to write this reflection I can still see, vividly, the friendly faces and characters of each VNMAP team member. I can see an energetic and newsy Tony Thien working along side the quiet and reserved Chau, his pharmacist spouse. I can see Pharmacist Patricia, who recently had sciatic surgeries, and bravely left her three young children under the care of their father to go on this mission. I can see the young couple Jeannie Diem and Jamie working together in the pediatric health seminar with the children. I can see an exhausted Cayl who had a stomach ache and had to rest on a cot, but after a brief rest would spring right up and continue his duties. I can see an ever smiling Sean Francis, a cute Andra with her blond hair, working along side a tall supermodel-like Elizabeth (who has mastered the Vietnamese salutations). Of course, there was Annu who has an interesting dieting habit and Uyen Phuong who has the voice of a nightingale. I can see a Shannon who has the brightest smile, a Dianna who is quiet yet, swift when it comes down to fruits and refreshments for everyone. I can see a sensitive and caring Brian Duy working together with Bao taking pictures and making friends with the

native children. I can see Huy Do, the leader of VNMAP, whose appearance resembles a rich heir yet has the work ethic of a worker and the leadership of a general. Last but not least, I can see Dr. Tan who is garrulous, forgetful at times, and sleep-deprived. His presence was instrumental to the success of the mission. Without him, VNMAP could not have legally operated as it did. I will always cherish and hold on to the affection the group has shown towards me by calling me "Mother," an honor which I hold dearest to my heart.

Personally, it was the first time I've ever guided a charity group into the far reaches of rural Vietnam. Although a thorough research was conducted by the VNMAP organizers, and even though the group had contacted local representatives and had established communication with the local authorities, none of us could anticipate how our mission would turn out. We cannot imagine what each place that we will visit would be like, how we would be received by the local authority and the local people, and ultimately how we would be able to accomplish our goals. I had so many concerns throughout the trip but refrained from articulating them so everyone could carry out their duties without vexations. I can only let out a sigh of relief when the group accomplished the mission and returned safely to HCMC. The group consisted of 18 diverse members, thus conflicts were inevitable. Certain arguments or misunderstandings were unavoidable, but they were constructive rather than derogatory. All misunderstandings were promptly resolved and everyone worked harmoniously together to achieve a common goal.

On the afternoon of June 27, the group journeyed to the Ben San Leprosy Camp in Binh Duong Province to hand out more than 80 gifts. For the next three days, half of the VNMAP members continued to visit the HIV solitary camp at Cu Chi (in HCM City), handing out more than 100 gifts to the Center for Pediatric Thyroid Adenoma, contributed funds to the fundraising event for the Center for Blind Youths, and visited the HCM City University of Pharmacology. In addition to the gifts and financial assistance, the group brought with them the spirit of friendship, warm affections, and bright smiles.

In retrospect, it is regretful that a number of patients were turned down due to the legal restrictions and the inadequate manpower and medical resources. Their anguished departures were heart-wrenching. But, we have tried our best and what we have done is a testament to our commitment. According to a source, the people anticipated our arrival in excitement and mourned our leaving with meritable memories. Overall, the mission was a success and even the local governments seemed to agree.

Through this mission, every member of VNMAP has acquired ample precious experiences as well as good memories. I hope that foreign "gold" will forever pour into my beloved country as well as to other developing countries to show the indigent people that life is still beautiful, that there are people who still care, and that the poor and unfortunate have not been abandoned by the outside world. The feasibility of such hope, of course, relies on the generosity and lending hands of those concerned for the well-being of humanity.

Binh Trieu, August 2008
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