

Học Mãi second year student report

“They say you come to Vietnam and you understand a lot in a few minutes, but the rest has got to be lived....”

Five fortunate second year medical students realised this was just as true for the hospitals of HaNoi as it was for Thomas Fowler’s Việt Nam in the film *The Quiet American*. We spent four weeks in HaNoi as part of the Học Mãi Scholarship program. This experience introduced us to an incredible culture, a dedicated and committed people and of course offered a unique insight into medicine in a developing world.

The concept of cross cultural exchange in medicine was particularly pertinent for us. We came to understand the values behind Học Mãi: ‘Forever learning’ during our time at the two largest hospitals in HaNoi; Viet Duc the major trauma and surgical hospital, and also Benh Vien Bach Mai, the major medical hospital. While our Vietnamese was virtually non-existent besides “Xin Chao” (hello) and “Tôi không biết nói Việt” (I don’t speak Vietnamese) we found the doctors to be extremely helpful and accommodating.

During our time in the emergency department of Viet Duc, a place of organised chaos, we followed patients from admission to surgical management. Many of the cases were a result of motorcycle or work related accidents, which highlights the importance of good public health. We were able to participate in discussions regarding their presentation, diagnosis, management and also follow these patients to surgery. We were given the opportunity to observe and assist in trauma and orthopaedic surgery, spinal, gastrointestinal, hand and neuro-surgery.

Bach Mai offered us an insight into a number of areas in medicine. Guided by our attentive doctors, our knowledge of dermatology, obstetrics, infectious diseases, emergency medicine, poisons and cardiology in this cultural context improved. Their enthusiasm to teach not only medicine but also the culture of their nation enriched our experience. From visits to museums to tea houses and local restaurants (not to mention tasting all the delicious delicacies), the doctors made every effort to impart to us the cultural richness of Việt Nam.

The Vietnamese medical system is by no means archaic, in fact many specialists have spent time overseas as part of their training and subsequently strive to continually modernise the way medicine is delivered in Việt Nam. We met many of the Vietnamese Học Mãi scholars who had just returned from Sydney. Their experiences in Australia were very positive and valuable in the sense that they could make progressive changes to the way they practise medicine in Việt Nam. It was encouraging to see these young doctors strive to change the status quo of Vietnamese medical culture.

The Vietnamese medical system is intrinsically complex and operates on a user pay basis. We saw many diseases in Việt Nam which are no longer exist in the western world. Diseases such as tetanus which is easily preventable by vaccine, is not an uncommon occurrence in Việt Nam.

While our role as medical students was somewhat limited, we felt we could contribute in other ways and developed some presentations for their English club, and regularly engaged with junior doctors and students to practise their English and even French. We

were able to forge good relationships with the doctors, and hopefully inspire them to partake in the Học Mãi program.

We all learnt to value the public health system in Australia; the importance of research and innovation in the medical field in developing 'best practise' and evidence based medicine. One of the most important lessons gained from this program is that as medical students we have the opportunity to learn from different cultures, appreciate their needs and better understand how other medical systems work. Once we are fully trained medical professionals however, we will have acquired the skills to address these needs and hopefully give back to the people that have so little, yet share so much. At this early and impressionable time in our medical careers, observing the practice of medicine in a developing country has fostered a continuing desire to participate in international health.

We thank Học Mãi for this wonderful opportunity.

Susanna Lam and Renee Burton

On Behalf of the 2008 Học Mãi Scholarship recipients