

Hoc Mai placement reflection: Robyn Weymer.



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After receiving news that I was selected to be awarded a Hoc Mai scholarship for a placement in Vietnam, I was immediately filled with excitement about the experience which lay ahead. I formulated learning goals which I hoped to achieve, and read up on the city and hospitals in which we were going to live and work for four weeks. I memorised a few Vietnamese phrases, sampled some different Vietnamese foods, and researched their culture, history, government, and health care system. Eventually, I departed Sydney feeling well prepared and confident. Upon my arrival in Vietnam however, I quickly learned no amount of information available could have prepared me for how amazing this country is, nor relate the incredible, eye-opening experiences I was to have.

Joining medical, physiotherapy and nursing students on this placement provided the opportunity to share and discuss our experiences from within the varying perspectives of each field. For many of us this was the first time in our degrees that we were able to and encouraged to work closely with and spend time with students and new graduates from different departments. Further, being placed with another student from Speech Language Pathology (Lucy Bath) allowed me to experience working as a team while building a closer relationship as colleagues and as friends.

Arriving at Bach Mai hospital on our first day, we were surprised to learn there was no longer a speech therapy clinic in the rehabilitation department. As an emerging field of allied health in Vietnam, the speech therapy clients had been temporarily relocated to Hanoi Medical University (HMU) while a larger clinic was prepared to open later the following year. This therefore opened the opportunity for myself and Lucy to tour the other departments in Bach Mai hospital, and to visit the clinic at HMU. At HMU we were introduced to a new graduate in speech therapy, Miss Ly, who welcomed us warmly and allowed us to observe and participate in clinic sessions with her clients. While overcoming the language barrier was difficult at times, Miss Ly and her colleagues kindly took the time to explain the case history of the patients she saw and the general processes followed during speech therapy intervention. Her current caseload comprised of paediatric clients with speech articulation and language difficulties accompanying presentations of autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and speech motor disorders. While the techniques and resources to treat each client group were similar, (E.g. the use of language stimulation toys and songs, auditory bombardment, modelling and repetition of words/sounds), Miss Ly reported the clients had been progressing in their treatment and gains were seen during our time there. Miss Ly had graduated as a nurse before taking her role as speech therapist at HMU. Though her training therefore had not been as comprehensive as a speech pathologist in Australia, she displayed a creativity, enthusiasm and dedication to her work which was inspiring to us and beneficial to her patients. The department housed resources and guides for therapy programs we are learning to use at University in Australia; however, as they are published in English they remain unused. During our 2 weeks with Miss Ly, Lucy and I were able to draw some similarities in the universal techniques used and were able to

contribute to the clinic's resources with new language stimulation therapy aids which were available in both Vietnamese and English.

For the second half of our placement, we spent time in the Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) department in Bach Mai hospital. Here, my time was divided between the clinic supervised by Dr Hũu and nurse Thrinh, and surgery with Dr Dũng. While Speech Language Pathology students in Australia are not required to partake in surgical visits during their studies, this placement presented the opportunity to view and gain a greater understanding in the underlying structures of the speech and hearing mechanism and the anatomical manifestations of the symptoms we learn about in textbooks and strive to treat in speech/language therapy. This proved to be a significant learning experience for me and one I am truly grateful for. We were again warmly welcomed by the whole department of surgeons, specialists, nursing staff and students, led by Dr Dinh.

Here I learned the processes used to investigate, diagnose and treat disorders and disease of the structures of the ear, nose and throat. We were able to discuss the wide scope of practice of Speech Pathologists in Australia and how this can benefit patients at various stages in preventative and curative health care, particularly voice therapy in prevention of voice disorders and therapy as an alternative to surgery. 'Reorganising' how a patient uses their voice for example may eliminate the need for surgical intervention. Though therapy can often be a time consuming process, the benefits from reducing surgical patient numbers may be viewed to present great benefits both for the patient and for the health care system. The Vietnamese doctors were highly skilled, many having trained at HMU, overseas in the USA and France, or been recent recipients of, or current applicants for training and further professional development provided by the Hoc Mai Foundation. My eagerness to learn about cultural and medical practices in Vietnam was matched by their willingness and enthusiasm to share their knowledge to develop my skills and professional practice in Australia.

During my time in the hospitals in Vietnam, I began to develop an active support network with health professionals and medical students with whom skill sharing and support was facilitated, and which will continue upon my return to Australia. Though challenging at times, overcoming the language barrier when communicating in this cross-cultural setting has enhanced my awareness of the struggle many patients with communication difficulties encounter in seeking health care services.

In addition to our time at the Hospital, we were lucky enough to be able to explore Vietnam and gain a greater insight and appreciation for its rich history and culture. Between discovering the capital city of Hanoi, group visits to the beautiful world heritage Halong Bay, Sapa, and touring the south of Vietnam, we visited historical sites and were guided through the changing images of the country, its people, and its infrastructure (including the hospitals in which we were working while on our placement) during the continued development of the country.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time on this placement and the opportunities it presented to promote awareness of the importance of communication, and the role a speech pathologist plays in enhancing the quality of life for those affected by communication and/or swallowing impairments. The knowledge, insight, and relationships founded during this placement will continue to remain a part of me throughout my professional career by truly reflecting the meaning of Hoc Mai: '*forever learning*'. I would again like to thank the staff and members of the Hoc Mai Foundation, the University of Sydney, and our Vietnamese hosts for providing me with the opportunity to take part in this extremely rewarding learning experience. With your support and continued investment, this program of bilateral exchange will continue to promote academic and professional growth, highly valued by all partners involved.

