

**ELECTIVE REPORT****HUE CENTRAL HOSPITAL, VIETNAM**

My time at Hue Central hospital was certainly interesting and an experience that will stay with me for a long time. Vietnam is a country that has shaken-off colonialism, embraced communism and repelled the Americans; all in just the last 60 years. This history makes for a land that is damaged – heavily mined and strewn with ordinance; home to people that still bare the scars of war. However, all is not lost; the Vietnamese thrive with one of South East Asia's most robust and fastest growing economies. Although there is still mass deprivation this is a country where almost everyone works – there maybe poverty, but begging is virtually unheard of. Vietnam may have had a difficult past, but it has embraced it, choosing the best of what foreign rulers inflicted upon them and amalgamating these into the country it is now. You can eat dog in Hanoi, but equally you can get an excellent espresso and croissant – indeed France and Vietnam come to head-to-head in street food; you can eat classic Chinese-influenced bbq pork stuffed into a fresh, crispy baguette. So what does this have to do with medicine? To understand a country you have to understand the psyche of the people. Hue Central Hospital reflected this well.

Built in the heart of the political and cultural capital of Vietnam, and surrounded by 18<sup>th</sup> century fortified walls next to the perfume river, the hospital is a vast site of many buildings, some dating back to the French colonial times, others built as harsh utilitarian communist concrete blocks, whilst the newest parts are gleaming examples of modern architecture boasting swathes of mirrored glass and steel – as with much of modern Vietnam a product of American investment. This juxtaposition of new and old was also evident within the medicine that was delivered within these walls.

Although there was a major language barrier it was possible to get a real feel of how medicine was practiced. Western medicine is very much the frontline here – students are taught in French – but traditional Chinese medicine (that many rural and older people strongly believe in) is also taught and used in conjunction with modern medicine. It was interesting to see how much time the medical students spend with the patients and delivering treatment. When it came to complementary, tradition medicine, the students were hugely hands-on and attentive to the elderly patients. I regularly saw doctors and students performing acupuncture for chronic back pain in elderly patients and giving vigorous and lengthy massage to these patients. This sort of treatment and time-intensive input with hands-on medicine just doesn't occur in the UK. How effective this form of treatment was hard to gauge as the language-barrier caused difficulty in defining its efficacy. However, massage, physio and even acupuncture are certainly becoming more common-place in the treatment of chronic disease in the UK, and I'm sure if you're elderly it must be nice to have someone give you a massage and chat away with you – if anything it must break-up the monotony of your stay hospital.



Vietnam may be a third-world country, but it does not mean that the health-care system is non-existent. Infact, every child until the age of 16 receives free health care in the area in which they live. This does, however cause problems. Some of the less educated people fail to trust their doctor or small local community hospitals. Instead they may travel hundreds of kilometres to major cities to seek treatment at the larger hospitals that they perceive to offer better care and more highly qualified doctors. This is often to the detriment to the health of the patient. Many become more ill on their journey, complicating their original ailment or not making at all. The other large problem with this 'health care migration' is that if the patient attends a hospital outside their local 'county', they have to pay for treatment that would otherwise be free to them at home. This causes serious problems. I saw people that were unable to pay for treatment and were left with serious cases of pneumonia as they couldn't afford medication. I also saw a family with a young girl that had asthma. They had travelled many hours to have her diagnosed. When it came to buying the medication that she desperately needed, they had to sell all their pigs and chickens. The medication cost around fifteen pounds; when you consider that the average monthly wage is thirty pounds, this was a considerable sum for them to pay.

When researching Vietnam before my stay, it became evident that the the need for malaria prophylaxis was a must – in much of the north and central Vietnam it is endemic. I therefore assumed that I would come across many patients in hospital with malaria. Much of my time was spent on the paediatric wards – it was here that I thought I would see malaria. I was surprised that I didn't see a single case. It would appear from the vibrant pictorial posters adorning the walls of the hospital that the Vietnamese population are well informed as to its prevalence and the ways to avoid it. What did surprise me were the number of paediatric cases of severe pneumonia that needed hospital treatment. It was difficult to decipher as to why there were so many cases, but our brief contact with doctors that spoke English or French revealed their reasoning. Many of the children that were ill came from impoverished families that lived in cramped, over-populated and poor housing conditions. This lead to easy cross-infection by other household members. This, coupled with inadequate nutrition and the belief in traditional medicine, lead to many children becoming severely ill. Whilst I must remain open-minded to traditional remedies, it is difficult to see families arriving at hospital with desperately ill children – their presentation to hospital being delayed due to the unsuccessful use of natural remedies - leading to children being severely ill, when I'm sure if the parent sought medical attention at the first sign of illness, these patients would not have needed to be admitted or be a deaths door. Whilst the use of massage and acupuncture may be useful in the treatment of chronic pain or where these methods are trialled after the failure of 'conventional' methods may be beneficial, I fail to see the value of pungent herbs being tied to a child's head to treat pneumonia. Maybe I'm sceptical and blinded by my medical education that I have received; but it is agonising to see patients severely ill when perhaps a course of oral antibiotics early on could have saved them from more aggressive treatment.

Perhaps the largest difference that I experienced whilst in Hue Central were the paediatric 'admissions clinics'. The doctor was obviously very competent and his skills at using a

stethoscope while the child was crying was amazing – how he heard anything is beyond me and I'd certainly be happy if my clinical skills were half as good as his. Children would come in with parents and he would take the briefest of histories, rapidly examine the patient and decide whether they needed admitting. For any child that was not severely ill, they would either be given the appropriate prescription and sent home. For those being admitted it would be iv fluids and antibiotics – I was unable to ascertain if the child had bloods or cultures done. This type of medicine appeared rapid and ruthless. I have become so accustomed to lengthy consultations and endless blood tests that this type of practice left me feeling that it is only those that are very ill stay in a hospital where resources were obviously limited. Despite the size of Hue Central and it's high-tech looking cardiology unit, there were still often two or even three patients to a bed. And as with everything in Vietnam, everything is at as juxtaposition with old and new. Even at 8am morning ward rounds, there would be doctors, patients and relatives sitting in the canteen surrounded by empty beer cans and over-filling ash trays.

However medicine is practiced in Vietnam, it does serve the people well, but I leave the country feeling that old habits need to be removed and some of the newer aspects of Vietnam could be amalgamated more actively into this beautiful country.