

PROJECT LOKUN: Cultivate, Connect, Care

Text by Dr Koh Jun Rui Don
Photos by Oliver Lim Tze Rong

Cambodia is considered one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia and has a struggling healthcare system. The Asian Development Bank estimated in 2019 that around 17.8% of the population live below the National Poverty Line. Even for those who are employed, 14.2% of them earn wages below the \$1.90 purchasing power parity a day as of 2022.¹ Cambodia's healthcare infrastructure, particularly in the rural areas, is limited and often lacks essential facilities, equipment and trained medical personnel. They also have one of the lowest population density of doctors. According to the World Bank, Cambodia had only 1.4 doctors per 10,000 people as of 2020.² For these reasons, Cambodia became the focus for Project Lokun.

Restarting the project

Project Lokun is a humanitarian project aimed at serving underprivileged villagers in the Pursat province of Cambodia. The main goals of the project are to increase health awareness through education and to provide consultations in village clinics. Well known to those who study in NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, this

project is fully organised by Year 2 medical students and often supported by doctors who themselves were previously student participants. The project offers participants a chance to make meaningful contributions to society as well as the opportunity to gain valuable practical experience through overseas community work. Up until the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Project Lokun had been steadfastly running bi-annual trips since it was first established in 2006.

Unfortunately, the two-year disruption caused by COVID-19 halted all momentum gained throughout the years. Organising members from the last trip had since moved on and graduated, leaving little guidance for the current committee. Another hurdle was the recruitment of doctors to help run the village clinics. Due to the long hiatus of the project, the organisers lost contact with those who had previously volunteered. Despite these challenges, the organising committee did a great job by partnering with medical students from the local University of Puthisastra (UP) to get the project up and running.

The 31st Project Lokun team set off in the last week of March 2023. I was

initially nervous as it would be my first involvement in the project as well as volunteering as a doctor. Furthermore, I had not been to Cambodia before. Fortunately, I found a familiar face in the other Singaporean doctor volunteer, Dr Samuel Koh. We had first met through our involvement in rugby for the 2017 South East Asian Games and I quickly reached out to him. He shared his previous experience participating in the project back when he was still a student, which gave me the confidence to embark on the trip.

After arriving at Phnom Penh International Airport, we were warmly welcomed by students from UP and we began our three-hour bus ride to Pursat. It was an eye-opening experience seeing how rural it was just minutes outside the city centre. There was a stark contrast between the modern city skyline and the impoverished communities right beyond its borders. Healthcare facilities were scarce and even those within distance lacked financial accessibility. I soon realised the impact that Project Lokun would have on the population there which invigorated me for the following days of work.





Clinic work

Our base of operations for the first day of clinic was a local school in Pursat. The classrooms were segregated into different areas so that we could function effectively as a clinic. Villagers would come for triage, followed by a consultation and were subsequently sent to the pharmacy to collect medication if needed. Local students from UP played a crucial role in bridging the language barrier between us and the villagers. The first day of clinic had a turnout of over 60 patients, which proved to be a daunting task for just Dr Samuel and myself. Fortunately, a local doctor from the nearby hospital kindly came down to lend us a hand.

There was a wide range of issues seen in the consultations, ranging from simple viral respiratory tract infections to inguinal hernias. Our limited resources only allowed for the prescription of symptomatic medication and referrals to nearby hospitals if warranted, but the villagers were immensely grateful for whatever help we could give. While the clinic was running, commendable efforts were also made by the educational branch of the project to raise public health awareness. Basic hygiene, precautions for food and water cleanliness, and even musculoskeletal stretching exercises were taught to the many eager listeners.

The second day of clinic ran in similar fashion to the first. This time, our makeshift clinic was situated in the local town centre and a long line of villagers formed outside. Despite an exhausting first day, seeing an even larger turnout the next day was a surprisingly encouraging sight. Although it meant another hard day of work, I knew we would be able to touch a greater number of lives. The day went on and we examined patients,

prescribed medication and offered guidance for healthier lifestyles. I was greeted with a multitude of faces, each telling a unique story of hardship and hope. Soon I realised that beyond the medical treatments, simply lending an ear to listen had a transformative impact on the villagers. Their smiles and expressions of gratitude were the greatest reward we could have.

Every day brought new challenges and triumphs. In the end, I found the experience to be truly memorable. When the organising committee thanked us volunteer doctors, they highlighted that our work impacted not just the villagers whom we provided healthcare to, but also the UP medical students involved. They were eager to help those in need and our support empowered them to continue with their efforts.

Meaningful change

Aside from the medical aspect and volunteer work, the trip also exposed me to the rich culture and heritage of our fellow Southeast Asian country. I learnt about their rich history and traditions and the resilience that defined their spirit. I formed connections with the local community, forging bonds that were not only professional but personal as well.

My experience in Cambodia reminded me that a single individual, driven by passion and a genuine desire to help others, can create meaningful change. More than just a chapter in my life, it ignited a desire to make a difference wherever I went. As business returns to usual and Project Lokun goes back to running their bi-annual schedule, I hope the sharing of my experience will encourage other doctors to volunteer their time. Together, we can support the efforts of our younger peers and continue serving those in need. ♦

SMA and the SMA Charity Fund support volunteerism among our profession. SMA News provides charitable organisations with complimentary space to publicise their causes. To find out more, email news@sma.org.sg or visit the SMA Charity Fund webpage at <https://www.smacf.org.sg>.

References

1. Asian Development Bank. *Poverty Data: Cambodia*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3sTi7iL>. Accessed on 30 November 2023.
2. The World Bank Group. *World Bank Approves \$15 Million for Cambodia's Pre-Service Education System for Health Professionals*. In: *The World Bank*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/41osTdL>. Accessed on 5 December 2023.

Legend

1. Group photo after the second day of village clinic – students from NUS, UP and volunteer doctors
2. Village clinic consults with medical students from UP assisting with translation
3. Raising public health awareness through education

Dr Koh is currently a Postgraduate Year 2 medical officer who returned to Singapore after graduating from University College Dublin, Ireland with the aim of pursuing an orthopaedic residency. He enjoys teaching and community work, and also coaches primary school rugby in his free time.

