

The *Wind* beneath Their *Wings*

– *Food Empire Medical Mission to Manila*

By Manila Medical Mission

Being back in the Philippines was *such* a joy. We comprise nine undergrads from National University of Singapore: one pharmacy and eight medical students. We were in the Philippines from 31 May to 10 June this year, to provide medical aid and give health education, with the desire to one day see the communities we helped take ownership and stewardship of their health. Among many things, welfare and education packages were also distributed and qualitative research was done.

The puzzle of poverty – the Mangyan tribe

With each trip to the Philippines, we found out a little more about the poverty that plagues the underprivileged. Out of all the communities we served, the Mangyan tribe stood out for us in this respect. As this was our mission's third visit, it was amazing to watch the community evolve and change for the better, slowly but surely. In our time at the village, we held mobile clinics for two consecutive days, seeing up to 130 medical and 12 dental patients, each one with a life story they could never tell.

Apart from bathing the children, playing games with them, and helping to cook for all the tribespeople, we had the chance to visit the families house-to-house and speak with them personally. Through those visits, we would hear about their day-to-day struggles, and realise how accustomed they are to health problems that are more than preventable. Chief among them are severe complications of infections that can be easily treated if the right health-seeking behaviour is adopted. Last December, a boy who started out with a simple bacterial infection later developed meningitis, a severe complication that affected his walking. For this reason, our mission has always emphasised health education as a key thrust to sustainable health. On top of conducting health education sessions with both adults and children from the Mangyan tribe, we had the honour of meeting the village health worker for the first time, to exchange ideas on how improvements can



The long queue at a mobile clinic held for the Mangyan tribespeople

be made with regard to the tribespeople's health. To us, this is another small step in the right direction.

The issue of poverty can never be fully understood, but our mission aims to learn about it over time, that we may grow and mature in the help we offer. As such, we have set up a Research and Community Development subcommittee, which puts in great effort in preparing for, conducting and then analysing focus group discussions we have held in many of the communities. This is a long term investment made in the hope that we may one day make a deep and lasting impact on the communities we hold dear.

Yet, joy in the middle of it all – the Aeta tribe and Children's Community Centre

Three hours away from the heart of Manila, we arrived at Zambales, where the Aeta tribe resides. Even *before* entering the village proper, we were greeted by the toothy grins of the children, who excitedly helped us with a box or a bag each. It was a welcome that warmed our hearts and refreshed us for a long but enriching day ahead. It was then that we got our first glimpse into the joys that the poor somehow seem to be *full* of.

We quickly got to work and very soon, the clinic was bustling with activity, and 74 medical and six dental patients were attended to. Vaccinations were also administered

Photos: Manila Medical Mission



Ate Karen, our energetic translator, with a girl from the Girls' Home proudly holding notebooks in one hand and the pinwheel she made in the other!



Say cheese! A child participating in a colouring activity at the children's centre



A Mangyan family

as defence against pneumonia. Simultaneously, health education and community outreach activities were also well underway!

A short distance away from the clinic, some villagers and members of our team cooked a sumptuous meal of *adobo manok* (chicken stew) and rice. It was such a delight to work with the villagers as they constantly inspired us with their heart of service. There was always a smile on their faces, even while doing the smallest of tasks. Amid poverty, the camaraderie among the villagers seemed to have created in them a joy that left its unforgettable mark on us. The warmth we felt from the beginning of our visit was palpable till our last moments with them.

In addition, we witnessed how joy could be possible *in spite of* deep emotional hurts. We saw this in the children at the Night-Minding Community Children's Centre.

Set up by a district captain, this small centre is home to around 12 abandoned children (although the numbers may vary as more children are brought to the home and some leave as well). Upon arriving at the centre, we were immediately greeted by the enthusiastic children, who appeared with radiant smiles and jumped about tirelessly. Amid this excitement and joy, it was almost impossible to believe the horrendous pasts that these children have faced. Not only were they abandoned, but some of them had

also been introduced to drugs and substances. The story of one boy moved us deeply. He suffered from epilepsy, and behaved differently from the other children. It was then revealed to us that he was found *inside* a rubbish can, after someone heard his cries. The children's centre is his only refuge, and there are many like him all over the Philippines. He has prevailed, under the love and care of his caretakers, who became the wind beneath his wings. Similarly, our team desires to be the wind beneath the wings of those who desperately need help in the Philippines.

We had so much joy singing songs with the children, and colouring with them. In the spirit of good health practices, we also taught them the proper steps of hand washing, and made them all line up to wash their hands before handing them a burger and some juice. We are thankful that we were able to bring joy to them, and them to us.

Serving our best, that we may bring hope – the Girls' Home and Matutum squatter settlement

During this trip, our team resolved to serve our Filipino friends wholeheartedly: we went with a strong desire to bring hope to the communities, by showing that we care. Therefore, as we prepared ourselves for our visit to the Girls' Home, the question at the forefront of our minds

was: "How might we fill the hearts of these abandoned children with joy and with the assurance that there are many of us rallying behind them in love?"

We were privileged to have the unwavering support of Food Empire Holdings Ltd, who sponsored the school supplies that were given to the girls, as well as the generous sponsorship of Pilot Pen, who gave the children pens, mechanical pencils, and pencil lead. We are gladdened that our trip coincided with the start of their school term, as the stationery will come in handy. Beyond that, we hope these will give them a fighting chance at receiving education.

We were not sure if these girls knew why they were in the home, and if they ever thought about their future, but we do hope that they will learn to adopt a hardworking attitude in all things they do, treasure the family they have in one another and to dare to dream.

We too bear high hopes for the children of Matutum squatter settlement as each of them has great potential to shine.

A squatter settlement in the heart of Manila, Matutum is home to a heterogeneous group of people, ranging from young to old, and working in many different industries. The homes are all unique and allude to a kaleidoscope of life stories and experiences as well.

Our first service to them was rendering medical aid. We quickly set up our medical clinic in a community centre, and in no time, we were administering vaccinations and seeing a total of 75 patients.

In addition, children gathered in a separate room for a fun-filled programme of games and handicraft. Basic health education, from tooth brushing to hand washing, was also taught.

We hope that many hearts would be blessed with the services that we have provided. May each patient and each child who came our way leave knowing that they are



dearly loved, and may these acts of love create in them renewed hope that tides them through life in the squatter settlement.

Conclusion

All in all, the trip was an *amazing* and *fruitful* experience. We are keeping in contact with the community leaders and partners, so as to ensure we stay abreast of the changes over there and adapt our plans accordingly for the next trip in December. We are very excited about what lies ahead for our mission.

We would especially like to thank Philadelphia Christ-Centered Fellowship (Philippines) for their unparalleled support and guidance of our trip, as well as Food Empire Holdings Ltd, Pilot Pen, Borden Eagle, and many friends and family who constantly spurred us on.

If you'd like to support us, please contact us at manilamedicalmission@gmail.com, or visit us at <http://www.facebook.com/manilamedicalmission>. **SMA**

