

2010 October 31

Well.... we have just completed our R&R weekend by absolutely exhausting ourselves exploring every Angkorian ruin we could fit in between 5:00 in the morning and 5:00 in the evening. We watched the sunrise over Angkor Wat in the morning and speculated about whether all the postcards and pictures in the guide books are maybe photoshopped with extra colour???? Although the sky never flamed red it was still a lovely early morning experience, shared with a very large number of tourists from all around the globe. We quickly learned that as soon as one stepped outside the actual controlled tourist sites one would be bombarded by a large number of children - many looking about 6-8 years old - trying to sell us things. All of them assured us that they were just doing this now because it wasn't a school day. I find that bombardment by children one of the toughest aspects of travelling in countries with a lot of poverty. It's surreal when somebody takes the price of some craft item down from \$3:00 each to 5 for a dollar, simply desperate to make some sales.

Things did settle into a manageable "routine" after that first chaotic day in Baray. It was interesting to think back on the e-mail I responded to several weeks ago asking whether the anesthesiologist from the Philippines shouldn't come because we'd have too many anesthesiologists. I hurriedly replied that we should keep him on the team! The team was small and as Medical Director I would probably be having to be free to handle other things. Whew! That was a close one! Thursday was a good example of how much we needed that extra team member. At times I was organizing the list to get a surgeon and a patient that matched the surgeon's skill set at the same OR table. Other times Drew and I were working together to start an anesthetic or troubleshoot a problem. Sometimes I was cleaning equipment back at the sink and other times I was filling in as Recovery Room nurse, Chris is a Critical Care nurse from North Carolina who - along with another Critical Care nurse (Judy) from Kitchener- was doing the pre-op prep of the patients, the immediate postop care, plus the jobs usually done by ward nurses back home. Whenever Judy was actually being a scrub nurse, and Chris was over on the ward, I did a recovery room stint. Needless to say, having 'too many anesthesiologists' has turned out to be a **very** good thing.

When we first arrived at the Baray hospital Monday morning the place was swarming with people, an unknown number of which needed surgery, plus family members. There was a master list of people who had been preregistered, plus others who just tried to slip in. Initially it caused some problems among the patients when a non-registered patient managed to slip in a head of a registered one. Then by Wednesday it began to look as if maybe too many patients had been sent away and we might be sitting around waiting for work. No fear. Every day was filled up and a few patients have been told to come to Kampong Thom this week for their operation. Kampong Thom is only 30 minutes from Baray, where we worked this past week, so we've had nice flexibility that way.

I'm afraid Drew has encountered enough halothane-induced arrhythmias this week for him to have trouble understanding why some of us older anesthesiologists miss the old tried-and-true agent, However he's managing very well and we're grateful we have functioning EKG signals on our monitors to guide our management. Fortunately Drew seems to have forgotten the Ontario PAIRO contract governing working hours and he's doing a great job for as long as we happen to go.

We definitely depend a great deal on our translators here in Cambodia. Learning to take a highly directed history through a non-medical translator is an art. Only one of the new skills Drew has learned this past week. The best of them all is Bimol, a delightful young woman who goes at top speed with incredible efficiency and seems to have that instinctive, intuitive understanding of what is needed in a situation. She's a gem. When we aren't around she runs village feeding programs for the children. Her dream is to be able to develop a youth centre where some job skills could be taught for the young people she sees sitting around 'wasting their lives' as she puts it. In a culture where some male would have to first think that was a good idea following such a dream is difficult. Half the population of Cambodia is under the age of 20.

And now it's time to get to the bus and head for Kampong Thom. The plan is to set up the ORs today and start tomorrow.... as long as the King's birthday doesn't shut the place down. Thanks for remembering us as we try to serve the people here for another week.

Alison