

Another city, another Internet cafe. (one with sticky keys!)

The past week has been full of new experiences. For the first time since I started these trips to the Philippines, one of the weeks was scheduled at a government hospital in the Barangay (i.e. municipality) of Abatan in the Mountain Province on the island of Luzon. The project was always listed as being in Bontoc.... I gather because you'd never have a hope of locating Abatan on a map. We ended up at a 100-bed hospital without regular surgical coverage. It does have an obstetrician/gynecologist 3 days a week.

Getting there was an experience to be remembered. It started with exiting from Manila at a snail's pace in rush-hour traffic. Quite quickly the roads deteriorated as we twisted up into the mountains and our '8-hour trip' turned into a 12-hour marathon 'massage' that landed us at our inn at 4:00 am, all rather stiff and sleepy. The next day we realized exactly what kind of road conditions we'd been travelling on in the dark during the night. Good thing we have had very skillful drivers. We then carried on into the mountains to the famous Banaue rice terraces (a World Heritage Site) and to Sagada for our weekend of R&R. Wow! I've definitely been introduced to an incredibly beautiful region of the Philippines. With two team members along who grew up in this area we were introduced to all sorts of info and experiences we undoubtedly would have missed if we had come as ordinary tourists. The roads, however, are the pits. We drove most of the first hour this morning at 20 km/hr because otherwise the van would have self-destructed on the unpaved road with its frequent additions of landslide debris adding to the bumps.

Luis Hora Memorial Hospital was incredibly welcoming to us.... especially considering how much work we created for everyone. They turned their delivery room into a second operating room to give us three operating sites. I have no idea where babies were delivered this past week. Their anesthesiologist had been chosen to be our liaison person for the team. I really liked that because only an anesthesiologist ever understands what it is we other anesthesiologists need to feel reasonably functional. It became clear the hospital staff were blown away by how many supplies we had brought with us. It is always interesting to work in someone else's space, barging along with not the faintest idea of how many of their protocols one is violating. Turned out I was supposed to write orders on the regular order sheet for every bottle of IV fluid I hung in the operating room! It wasn't enough to have it all charted on the anesthetic record. I've never had to do that before, anywhere. I was corrected very politely when my chart deficiencies were noted. I gradually recognized that for some reason they have an incredibly labour-intensive system of charting in that hospital. I don't know how they ever get all their work done.

One of our anesthesiologists this second week was a young woman from Manila who recently finished her residency. We learned a lot about how the profession is organized in the Philippines and will now feel extremely grateful for how schedules are handled back home.

A lot of our problems were water-related. Apparently a crucial pipe in the regional water system was damaged recently and there rarely was any water pressure in any of the taps. (after seeing pipes running beside the roads for long distances in extremely rugged country it wasn't hard to understand how this could happen.) Surgical scrubs were quite creatively accomplished. After the person scrubbed thoroughly at the sink they would stand patiently until an assistant poured a pot of cold water (dipped out of a large bucket) over their hands to wash off the soap suds. A good shake and an air dry and one was ready for gown and gloves. Showers were also a challenge. T'boli's cold showers at least had happened in a warm climate. The Mountain Province is very cold at night.... and taps rarely yielded water; forget about shower heads. Let's just say that mornings involved a treasure hunt for a pot or kettle in which some water could be heated up on the gas ring up in the doctors' quarters upstairs so at least one's 'bucket shower' could have the chill taken off.

This week we did very few thyroidectomies, instead facing mainly cholecystectomies and hysterectomies with a few other things thrown in. We ended up using our very last bottle of bupivacaine for paravertebral blocks on our very last cholecystectomy patient.

The hospital was different from any government hospital I've ever encountered. The Monday morning flag ceremony that all staff are summoned to attend included pledges of allegiance to the flag, both the national and regional anthems, a devotional talk and prayers. That doesn't even happen at the Hotel Dieu Hospital any more! I never did find out what makes this hospital so different.

The surroundings of the hospital almost make Northern Canada medicine look easier to deliver. The hospital serves a huge catchment area, over which most of the population is scattered along terraces carved out of steep mountain sides. (the patients tended to have incredible muscle development from running up and down mountain sides carrying loads. Doesn't make a cholecystectomy particularly easy.) Roads are limited. I suspect a trauma rarely gets the help needed in a 'timely fashion'. Medivacs haven't made it to this part of the country.

As we were packing up Jason and I kept asking the local anesthesiologist whether any of our leftover supplies might be of use to him. He finally indicated that "the answer is always YES" so we just kept handing things over to him.

We ran out of patients by the end of Wednesday so we left early Thursday for the LONGGGG drive back to Manila. So far only one delay from a radiator failure in one of the three vans we're depending on. Would you believe we turned out to be quite close to a radiator repair shop??? God is good.

Friday evening:

Once again I have enjoyed being part of the rapid transformation of a group of strangers who share a common purpose into a congenial, efficient team. It's been great. And despite all the time used up travelling where planes don't yet go we did carry out 71 major operations and 30 minor ones.

Now for a brief sleep and a long flight home.....

Alison