

Dr Mark Flynn (top row, far right) with other volunteers of the Operation Nightingale medical team.



Volunteering fulfils more

GP Dr Mark Flynn recounts his journey out from general practice in the suburbs to join the Operation Nightingale medical volunteers team working with the humanitarian organisation Awareness Cambodia.

I HAVE always felt that my life was blessed living in Perth's northern suburbs, but I have found it hard to ignore the plight of those living in Africa and Asia. I was looking for a way to make a contribution while balancing my family commitments and, in 2012, found myself getting involved with Awareness Cambodia (www.awarecam.org.au).

One of my patients was involved with Awareness Cambodia's educational programs and told me that they had started up a medical stream (Operation Nightingale) to provide health services to one of Cambodia's poorest provinces, Kampong Speu.

After years of suburban general practice, I decided to join a team of medical volunteers travelling to Cambodia in 2012, a little daunted to contemplate the medical conditions encountered

in this unfamiliar setting. I had never diagnosed TB, HIV or tropical diseases and was not familiar with the treatment that was available but, armed with a tropical medicine book, I was keen to get over to Cambodia and use my skills to help those in need.

After arriving in Phnom Penh, we spent a couple of days familiarising ourselves with the country and getting to know each other. We were introduced to the main sites associated with the scourge that was the Khmer Rouge.

It is sobering to walk through a field still littered with the remnants of clothing and human bones from the 1970s genocide and hear of the one-way lorry trips to the killing fields.

One of the goals of Awareness Cambodia is to provide shelter and care for orphans while

providing an education for them (through to tertiary level).

We stayed at House of Progress where students are supported and cared for during their secondary education. Here we met Vanna and Vannary, our den mother and father, together with the delightful and enthusiastic students who welcomed us as if we were family.

Our first day of work involved a trip to the local Kampong Speu referral hospital, where we

took a walk through the various wards, examined donated diagnostic and surgical equipment, and investigated the local lab where a fairly broad range of tests were available.

We then spent a couple of days at Awareness Cambodia's local medical centres. People would turn up and for a small fee receive medical care. Patients presented with a spread of issues, including diabetes and hypertension, antenatal health and febrile illness.

For more information

Awareness Cambodia is a not-for-profit overseas aid organisation working in partnership with communities to assist some of the poorest and most underprivileged people in Cambodia.

A volunteer team of international doctors, nurses and allied health professionals will be sent to support local staff next September. Call +61 8 9370 1457 or email cambodia@awarecam.org.au.



Dr Flynn consults patients at a Cambodian clinic.



Some patients travel for hours to attend a mobile rural clinic.

than just medical need

The local medical students provided invaluable assistance in explaining information and our care plans for a patient's condition to them.

Then we were set to embark on the next stage of our trip: the mobile rural clinics. Our equipment and pharmacy supplies were loaded into vehicles and we were joined for the trip out to the remote villages by Sinal (our driver, pharmacist and logistics expert), medical students, local Khmer doctors and a health official. As the infrastructure in Cambodia only extends for one or two kilometres from the main arteries, we bounced through vehicle-swallowing potholes with frequent stops to ask directions.

The first clinic site was in a small primary school. We organised ourselves and the people

soon arrived. It was wonderful to connect so intimately with the Cambodians, despite the language barrier. It is amazing how people who live on a couple of dollars a day on the other side of

“A life-altering experience... and one I will repeat”

the world have the same aspirations we do: they want healthcare and education for their children, they dream of one of the local children leaving town to become a doctor.

The clinics were rewarding and busy. We would often spend one or two hours getting to clinics where we would treat hundreds of men, women and children, some of whom had travelled for

hours to be there. The medical problems extend to STIs and alcohol-related conditions. Iron deficiency is rife, and I later learned that the normal Hb is around 8. If HIV or TB was suspected, we advised the patient to attend the local hospital.

The time passed all too quickly. My experience of Cambodia was one which was both intimate and rewarding, and which I shared with a group of people of rare enthusiasm and positivity. Encouraged by what we had been able to do, I returned again in 2013. I have learnt a great deal from these experiences with Awareness Cambodia. It is inspiring to see people who have set aside a life of comfort in an affluent country to help people who are less well-off. This dedication and ongoing commitment to a vision is commendable.


The other side of the equation is to observe the deep divide that exists between what we accept as basic human rights and those which are accepted by the majority of Cambodians. They do this with generosity and good humour that is a lesson to us all.

I was so pleased to meet doctors and medical students who demonstrate a real passion for their country and are able to provide healthcare to those in need. Their enormous talent and generosity bodes well for their country as they grow into its leaders.

This has been a life-altering experience for me and one I will repeat. I recommend it to anyone.

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Volunteer Profile



NAME Dr Mark Flynn

ASSIGNMENT LOCATION Cambodia

ROLE Member of Awareness Cambodia's Operation Nightingale annual medical volunteers team