

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Mai Rostam, Gill Smith and Wee Lam, April 2019

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Cambodia with BFIRST president Wee Lam, Gill Smith from Great Ormond St Hospital and a team of international surgeons. The aim of the mission was to visit a children's hospital in Phnom Penh and do as much as we could over a three-day period. The team was quite diverse and the group included congenital hand surgeons, brachial plexus and lower limb specialists.

The first day was intense to say the least. At 8 am we walked through the waiting area, which was already filled with patients waiting to be seen. Some of them had been waiting for hours and some had travelled for days from remote villages just to be assessed. When the seats ran out they sat on the floor and when the floor became too crowded they milled about outside.

The local team have lined up cases that they think would benefit from our surgical expertise. There were a few syndactyly releases, a free functioning muscle transfer for a brachial plexus injury and some burns contracture releases.

There were four operating theatres, which in reality was one large operating room that was cordoned off into three sections by Plexiglas dividers set up down the middle of the room. You could walk freely between the three sections and you could see what was happening in each area. The fourth theatre was a small separate space, which had possibly been converted. The setup, although slightly alien, was extremely efficient. If anyone needed help they could call a friend from the next area and it was great for teaching as you could watch multiple operations simultaneously.

In the three days that we were there we performed about twenty operations of varying difficulty and we assessed around fifty patients for possible future interventions. The most difficult part for me was seeing the disappointment on the faces of the patients that were told there was nothing we could do further on this occasion.

By the end of the trip everyone was exhausted yet strangely refreshed. Trips like this really do remind you why you became a doctor in the first place. I would strongly encourage colleagues to pursue any opportunity to travel abroad and experience a different healthcare system, it not only expands your horizons but I do believe it makes you a better doctor as well.

Mai Rostam (BFIRST Trainee)



Gill Smith from Great Ormond St Hospital in consultation

