

## **Seeing God working amongst us in a remote village in Nepal**

This was to be the 40<sup>th</sup> Ear Camp run by the International Nepal Fellowship, a Christian mission doing medical work in Nepal. It involved 8 days of examining ears, prescribing medicines, doing hearing tests, fitting hearing aids and performing operations, carried out by an international team of consultants and nurses, supported by a dedicated team of Nepali staff.

Even though we had lived and worked in Nepal, this was my first camp and my role was to be general dog's body (and to see what my husband got up to twice a year for 2 weeks!). It turned out to be a huge adventure but also a tremendous privilege to see God in every aspect of it. In late November we had packed well over 100 kg of baggage, thanks to Air India's generous luggage allowance, which included hundreds of beautifully knitted hats made by friends for the patients. Peter Hollingsworth drove us to Heathrow where we met other members of the 15 strong team. The rest would be travelling from Australia and New Zealand.

Far too excited to sleep we enjoyed the majesty of the Himalayas as they came into view soon after we left Delhi. 2 hours later we arrived at Kathmandu, found a minibus and were launched into the melee of traffic, holding onto our seats as we wove in and out of numerous motorbikes, trucks and errant taxis. Our destination was the Summit hotel which perches above the smog of the city and offers an oasis of peace where we were able to catch our breath and meet the rest of the team. Next day we flew in a 30 seat plane to Pokhara, gasping at the even more stunning mountain views of the Annapurnas, Dhaulagiri and Hiunchuli...trekkers' paradise.

The final leg of the journey was an 8 hour, off-road, nail-biting Land-rover ride to Burtibang, a large village in western Nepal. People pay a

lot of money for that sort of experience; we had it for free including 3 river crossings. The hotel Ganga was definitely the best in town boasting 3 floors of double rooms, a dining room and 2 goats tethered outside, ready for the next festival feast. Thankfully we did not get to eat them but we did have chicken every day which was dispatched downstairs! Our hosts were delightful and looked after us, bringing lemon tea on a tray every morning, samosas and onion bajeas to the hospital at lunch time and serving a delicious dal bhat (rice, curried veg and chicken) in the evening, washed down with boiled water and another cup of tea.

The day began at 5.30 with the sounds of people clearing their throats, cocks crowing, kettles boiling and women sweeping their houses ready for the new day. After a delicious breakfast of omelette or curried beans we headed over to the building where the camp was held, a partly built new hospital which was very cold as the cement was still drying out and there were no window frames, just gaps filled with plastic sheeting. The wind whistled through and the surgeons had to wear layers of clothes under their scrubs to keep warm. News of each camp is advertised via the radio and people walk hours or even days to reach the village where it is held, queuing up for a ticket from the early hours of the morning on arrival. This camp attracted people from as far as Surkhet, many miles away.

Patients were initially examined by the doctors, this time from Birmingham Children's Hospital, Worcester Royal hospital, Q.E. Birmingham, New Zealand and Hereford County Hospital (Mike Smith). The patients then brought their card to me and I directed them to one or several of the following: ear syringing, pharmacy, audiology, surgery or discharge. I remembered enough of the Nepali language to communicate pretty well but there was a lot of amusement when I

asked a patient to give me her cucumber (kagati) instead of her paper card (kagaj)!

The camp ran like clockwork thanks to the expertise and preparation of the organisers, a formula that has worked well for many years and it was amazing to see the tremendous hard work and gentleness of the team as they worked to relieve suffering. The audiologists were legendary! working solidly from 9 to 7pm with a short lunch break in the sunshine to warm up. The hearing tests were done and hearing aids fitted in a dark, dusty outbuilding with around 150 patients per day. The atmosphere was calm and peaceful once everyone waiting realised that absolute quiet is needed for testing hearing.

Every patient had a story to tell but 3 stand out in particular:

A young couple brought their 3 year old son with Down's syndrome and additional learning disabilities. He was unable to walk and had no speech. They were hoping for a miracle cure. Ellen with her 45 year experience working in Nepal drew them quietly to one side and gently explained that Down's syndrome is not a disease that can be cured. She explained that children born with this condition are very loving and respond to love and that it wouldn't help to travel around looking for expensive treatments.

A woman walked for several days from a remote village suffering from severe deafness. She was an ideal candidate for a hearing aid and was overjoyed when she heard properly for the first time in 21 years.

A boy of about 8 years came with an itchy, infected ear and everyone gathered round to see the trophy that was removed...3 dead baby cockroaches!

On the last day of the camp the patients who had had operations were gathered and given instructions about caring for their ears post

operatively and given a contact should they need further help. Woolly hats were given out and we watched as people set off on the long trip home looking very distinctive in fresh white bandages topped with a colourful hat. May they all heal well and enjoy new found hearing. The week was over in a flash and we climbed wearily but happily back into the Land-rovers , thankful that all had gone successfully. All the praise however goes to God who watched over us, spoke to us each morning when we met for 'thought for the day', opened meaningful conversations, guided the surgeons and gave us strength and a sense of humour to cope in the far flung village of Burtibang.

We arrived back in Pokhara and indulged in steak and chips, pizza and ice cream and enjoyed the first hot showers for over a week! On to Kathmandu where we said goodbye to those who had become real friends through the camp experience and finally home in time to get ready for Christmas! David Hill collected us from the airport but I'm afraid we were poor company as we promptly fell asleep with jet lag! Our great thanks to all who volunteer and to those who help make the camps happen.

Fiona and Mike Smith

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