

Cambodia Vision – 2016 Mission
Pursat Cambodia , 24-30 October 2016

In October and November, I was very privileged to be part of Cambodia Vision’s 2016 mission to Pursat in Cambodia. Cambodia Vision’s approach is to travel to a remote province of Cambodia with a team of 60-70 people consisting of ophthalmic surgeons and nurses, hearing specialists, GPs and support staff and to do whatever it can to improve the health of the people in that area over a seven or eight day “mission”. The organisation was founded by Cambodian people and others in Australia who wanted to help the country of their birth. Everybody on the mission pays their own airfares and an additional amount for accommodation and meals. I support this organisation because it gets an enormous amount done by spending every dollar it raises on improving the health of rural people. It also provides training and skills to local medical students.

My contact with the organisation is a remarkable Cambodian woman Thida Yang. She and her family were refugees from Cambodia during the Pol Pot era. She quietly gets on with organising many good things for the Cambodian community with the greatest good humour and professionalism, as you can see from picture 1.



1 Thida armed with a smile and ever-present phone

A lot gets done each year. Over the seven days of the project, the team saw 3,603 people, performed more than 400 cataract operations, dispensed 1,200 pairs of spectacles, 600 hearing aids and diagnosed and treated many other complaints.

The first character-building part of the project is getting the equipment needed over to Cambodia. Singapore Airlines kindly gave everybody a baggage allowance of 35 kg. We were encouraged to take the minimum personal baggage required, so that we could load the equipment as luggage and not have to pay freight to get it across. I had only a carry-on bag, as did many people. You’ll see from the picture 2 below that we each then “adopted” a piece of equipment to get it onto the plane and through customs in both Australia and Cambodia.



2. Phnom Penh airport with our adopted luggage

We flew to the Phnom Penh via Singapore and then travelled out to Pursat by bus. Pursat is a city and province of Cambodia, about 170 km out of Phnom Penh. It is a big, sparsely populated province of



3 The lovely and competent Maly on one of the colourful buses

about 400,000 people and a city of 25,000 and is a four-hour trip by one of the extremely colourful buses from the Phnom Penh. The impact of Pol Pot's regime is still apparent, with far fewer temples and mosques than I had expected and much rebuilding now happening. The country-side is the normal lush vegetation, rice paddies with the occasional massive clothing factory.

The mission was allocated an unused section the hospital and quickly set up two operating theatres, a GPs' room, an optometry section, post-operative

recovery rooms and a dispensary. A reception and registration area was set up out in the open under a large marquee – this was my station. The mission had been well-advertised before we arrived and, as a result, in the first few days there were already about 600 people waiting to be seen.



4 Dakota-Rose

Travelling with me was Dakota-Rose, a 19-year-old woman from the community at Kempsey. Some of you will know that I own a company called Dakota Rose Investments and this was named after Dakota ten years ago when I was working in Aboriginal communities. Dakota's mother, Sue, and I became firm friends in those days and I have watched Dakota grow into a fine young woman since then. Besides working hard on the mission, Dakota fixed just about everybody's mobile phone problems whenever they turned up and kept amused the many kids who came to see what was happening . After the mission finished, Dakota stayed on in Cambodia and will be there for five months.

Our role on this mission was to be the first point of contact as people arrived to the reception area, a large, open area, which seemed to be a carpark. When we arrived at 0700 each morning, there were generally already more than 100 people waiting in the reception area.

Although our hilarious official title was "Crowd Control", we had little of this to do and our main role was to assess each person and understand what was wrong with them, assign them a number and a tag that indicated which specialist was to see them. Many people had both hearing and eye problems. Many of the problems were obvious, particularly with cataracts and tumours. However, I soon learned enough Khmer to be able to say "eye?" (panay) or "ear?" (traw jeak). In the first few days, this took up much of the day, as there was a constant flow of people, particularly when those who had been helped went back to their village or home and talked about the mission.



Our reception area was under a marquee, but alternately suffered from the sun or the rain. I acquired a rosy red colour quite quickly and then a couple of days later had waterlogged shoes. My Bizcaps cap disappeared quickly (it pays to advertise) and I soon got into the habit of buying a new hat in the local market each morning and giving it away to one of the kids at the end of the day. The picture below was taken in the early afternoon of one of the fine days when many people had been processed. In the morning, the entire area on the right and in the middle of the picture would be jammed packed with people. The little girl at the right of the picture seemed not to have ever seen a “barang” (foreigner) before and mimicked all of my actions for about five minutes. Here, I think she is saluting.



5 The reception area

The area to the left of the picture above was the computer registration group. This group sat with each patient, collected name and contact details, entered them onto a computer and produced a patient document that was completed as the person saw each specialist. After registration, the patient walked through a corridor to the left of this picture and sat in a large area on the other (front) side of this building (picture 7), waiting to be called in the sequence that had been assigned to them when they first arrived.

Another of my roles was to ensure that emergency cases, frail elderly people and respected monks and others were fast-tracked through the system. There were quite a few of these each day, including people having seizures, open wounds and tumours in eyes and other obvious emergencies. As I’ve found in other parts of the world, very elderly people were extraordinarily tolerant, waiting many hours, or even days, for what in our country would be thought to be an essential service.



6 When the storm hit

You’ll see in picture 5 above that the computer registration group sat in a footpath that is a little lower than the rest of the reception area, something that was very relevant when the storm hit, as you will see in picture 6 below. Computer registration was moved indoors and we continued, almost as though nothing had happened.

The scene on the other side of the building looked chaotic but was actually well-organised and well managed by Trish, on the left below (and picture 14) , who had just started her own recruitment company on the Gold Coast. Those to the right of the picture below had their eyesight tested (picture 8) and then waited to come up to the balcony where they went into one or more of the specialist rooms, optometry or GP.



7 The scene at the front of the building



8 Initial eye tests



9 The optometry room



By the time, I could take photos, it was generally late in the day. There are some excellent (but sometimes gruesome) photos of the operating theatres and audiology sections at <https://www.facebook.com/CambodiaVision/>

The following picture (10) was the scene at the end of the day when most of the patients had been triaged, sent to their respective specialist area, operated on or had their vision tested. At this point, there were still a couple of hours to go as there were 50 people still waiting for optometry or GP services.



10 The front of the building, late afternoon

The mission also provided takeaway style meals for all of the patients and any of their accompanying family. The photo below (11) was the scene at the food line on the day that it rained, showing the river running down the middle of the normally dry waiting area. The slight woman the front of this picture was one of the cleaners who came every day and worked like a Trojan. She was there when we arrived and still there when we left, generally 12 hours later. On the day that we packed up, she was carrying around very heavy pieces of equipment, refusing all help from we mere males.



11 The line waiting for dinner

Dakota did a terrific job keeping the kids happy and entertained. If she wasn't throwing a ball around, making bubbles for the kids to chase or taking their photograph and turning them into monsters with some mobile app or the bubble machine. There were plenty of hugs.



12 Dakota and the kids

Vicky (Picture 13) was our always-accommodating, always-smiling computer registration person. She was on the mission with her mother and sister and, like all of the volunteers, worked very long hours each day.



13 Vicky and Dakota

Trish and Judy were first timers on a mission, both from Brisbane. Trish was mentioned above, had just started her own business in partnership and, despite being ill for a while did really excellent work making sure that people were seen by the correct specialists in the correct order. Judy was in the dispensary which provided 1200 pairs of spectacles-enough said.



14 Trish and Judy

We were lucky to have a wonderful group of local students come to help us. This wonderful young woman, Brosmauy, was really a joy. She never stopped smiling and laughing and gave me a hug every time I walked past her.



15 Brosmauy



16 the students

Each day was a hard slog. Because of the sheer volume of people, it was hard for everybody. However, it was particularly hard for the surgeons and nurses, who were on their feet for 12 hours executing really minute procedures. One of the original doctors involved with Cambodia Vision, the much-loved Chris Brown, a year older than me, became ill during the week and needed to take a day off. Here (picture 16) a couple of our volunteers are massaging his legs overseen by our GP. Being the only two bearded people on the mission, Chris and I constantly promoted the Shakespearean concept that “ He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man.” We would recite this to each other at any time we met.



17 Chris Brown-he that hath a beard.

I was very surprised at the large number of Muslim communities that we passed through on the way to Pursat. By about the second day, the word must have gotten out to them that we were welcoming all people and, led by a couple of community leaders, a large number of women came in, particularly with eye problems. We had some hilarious exchanges, including the woman in orange in picture 19. In no uncertain terms she declared that I was “handsome” and demanded a photograph with me, which was a surprise, as was the declaration of “handsomeness”.

The man in picture 18 became our enforcer, armed with his megaphone and a very stern look, not evident in this photograph. His back-story is pretty tragic, with a child with serious medical problems for which he probably will not be able to get treatment. Every time we walked past each other, we both snapped to attention and gave a brisk salute.



18 The volunteer Wrangler



19 You are handsome!

The kids, of course, tugged on our heartstrings. This young girl (picture 20) made half hourly trips around the rubbish containers to rescue plastic bottles and cans, no doubt to be sold for recycling. She never failed to smile as she walked past.



20 The bottle and can collector

Narelle, a theatre sister, took some time off to teach the kids hopscotch. They were interested in anything, hopscotch, bubble blowing, ball throwing. Many were simply wandering the streets.



21 The hopscotch kids

From the second day, Sophy (pronounced Sou'Phi, picture 22) became our translator when the going got tough. At 11, she was already working most days and can only attend school one day a week. On other days she sells sugarcane juice and helps her mother and father with their food stall and Tuk-tuk. She spoke some English but by the end of the week had picked up quite a bit more. She is as sharp as a tack and with some would be an exceptional student. I decided to extend my girls education trust to cover Cambodia and hope that she might be the first from there. We shall see.



22 Sophy

She was also an excellent teacher. It was largely due to her that by the end of the week I could count to 1000, say hello, goodbye, is everything OK, and quite a bit more. Her method for teaching, shown below (picture 23), and on the white notes on the right side of my face above, was to write the Khmer word for that part of the body and then make me pronounce it until I got it right. She was a tough teacher.



23 Teaching method

I had another translator, Rith, who was also our IT expert. As well as looking after our computers and Wi-Fi, he was on call for his company, which represents LG in Cambodia.

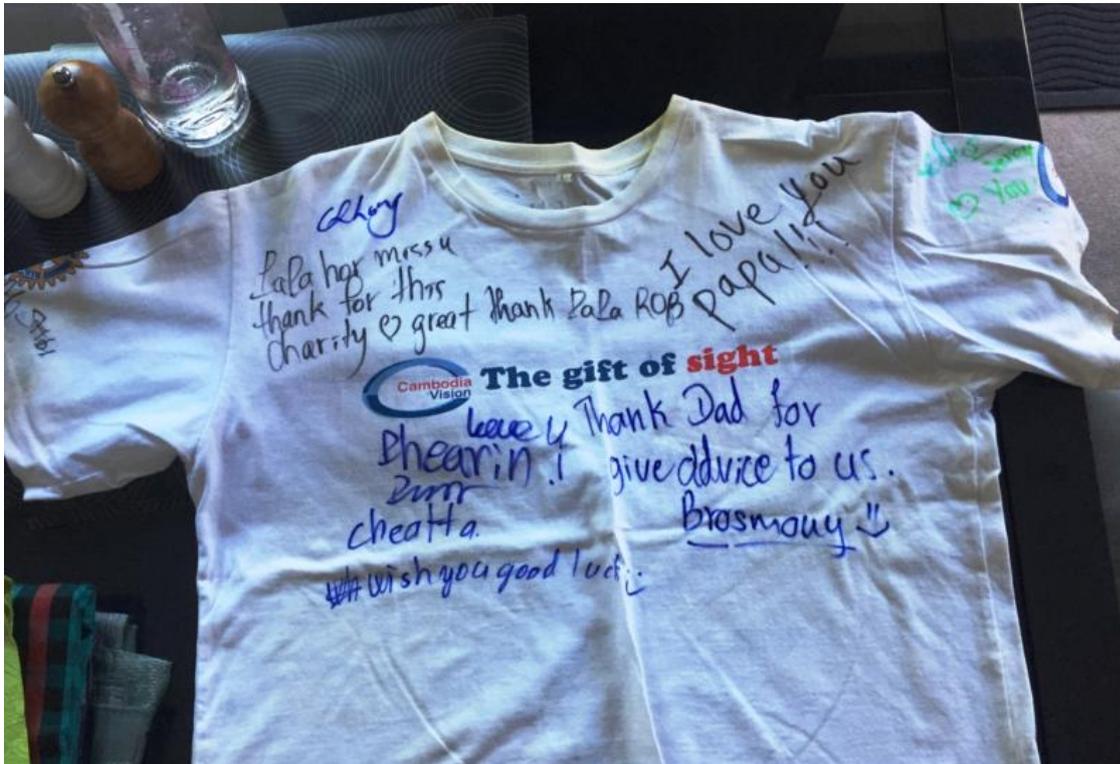


24 Rith

The mission members attended a couple of politicians' dinners in their honour and were given this certificate by the local Governor. You will know that I am cynical about politicians. Although I am sure that their sentiments were genuinely meant, I had the strong impression that there was some useful political mileage to be gained by association with such a successful mission. The American and Australian ambassadors attended dinner in Phnom Penh and I have to say that I was almost ashamed to hear the miserable defence of what Australia provides to Cambodia produced by our ambassador.



The certificate was welcome, but my most treasured possession is my (now) grubby old T-shirt inscribed by the local medical and high school students and others. While I'm not overjoyed at being known as Granddad and Papa, the genuine affection was really moving.



After supporting this organisation for some years I was finally convinced by Thida to come on a mission. I'm very glad I did.

I can affirm that this is one of those organisations that gets on and does practical on-the-ground work, spending everything that it raises on its objectives.

The results of the 2016 trip were:

) People seen:	3,603
) Eye surgery:	433
) Hearing aids:	670
) Prescription spectacles:	280
) Reading spectacles	1000 +
) Sunglasses:	1000+
) Treatments by GPs:	2400+

In addition, the project:

-) trained 30 Australian and local medical and High School students;
-) Donated equipment and medication to the Pursat Hospital;
-) Donated 11 air conditioning units to the Pursat Hospital;
-) Donated toys and educational materials to children of those who attended;
-) Provided nourishing lunch and dinner to all those attending each day.

A spectacular achievement for a completely voluntary organisation.

There was some sadness.

We could have conducted more than 600 cataract operations, but many people who needed such an operation refused because they were the sole breadwinner and could not afford to take a couple of days off work to rectify a situation that would probably find them blind sometime in the future. We will look at how we might do with this next year.

The second sadness was related. We treated many elderly people who had, perhaps, 15 to 20 years of life. We didn't see many of the young people who were working and couldn't take time off, but who would benefit for 40 to 50 years, if their eye problems could be fixed early.

Other than Sophy and the street kids, two events stand out.

-) The elderly lady with essentially no sight who, when given a piece of paper to look at after treatment, wasn't fabulously enthused but who, looking up and seeing one of our male operating theatre volunteers (a proud truckie!), who always wore a bright orange dress (!!), covered with red hibiscus, broke into a massive grin, probably making out colour for the first time ever or at least in many years.
-) The second was a long talk with a gentle man who brought his younger sister in. She had been mute and deaf since birth. He was a teacher and so we could converse in his pretty good English and my execrable French. He had heard about the mission and set out at 7 AM in the morning, arriving at 4.30 in the afternoon. His commitment to helping his (very beautiful) younger sister was exceptionally humbling.

This is a very worthy cause. Tax deductible donations can be made to Cambodia Vision at:

Account Name: Cambodia Vision
Bank: National Australia Bank
BSB: 082057
Account: 871975065