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# Humanitarian Medical Mission Experiences in India

By Vina Limson, BSN, RN, CNOR

I was originally drawn to the Nursing profession because I wanted the opportunity to help disadvantaged people. I knew that, as a nurse, I would be able to work with those truly in need. As I saw it, nursing is fundamentally about caring and because of that fact nurses can make a difference in the world every day. Nursing offers limitless possibilities, as well – there are many different avenues available to realize your dream.

Despite having a busy family and career life, I am able to volunteer my time as a nurse for a cause about which I feel passionate. The experience has strengthened me and has brought fulfillment to my life, as well as allowed me to provide a great example for my children. It is important to be paid for what we do, but volunteering can be a wonderful enriching experience. Doing volunteer work has allowed me to meet new people, learn new skills, and to be a part of something truly life-changing for others.

Locally, I volunteer for Fresh Start Surgical Gifts as a perioperative nurse. We do plastic reconstructive surgeries on disadvantaged children and young adults with deformities caused by trauma, accidents, abuse or congenital defects. I have been volunteering with Fresh Start since 2004.

Part of the program involves going with Dr Amanda Gosman, a Plastic Surgeon at UCSD, to the Hospital de Infantil de las Californias in Tijuana, Mexico where we perform surgeries on children with cleft lip, palates and craniofacial deformities.

It was on one of these trips that Dr. Gosman asked me if I would like to go to India with her in February 2010. She needed an OR Nurse to assist her with plastic reconstructive surgeries, mainly for cleft lips and cleft palates in children. I was excited at being offered the opportunity to travel to India, especially since I had not visited that part of the world. Dr. Gosman did not provide a great deal of information about the trip, so I did not know what to expect. However as soon as my vacation request was approved, I started on the rather



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The San Diego Team - Vina, Evelyn, Dr Champaneri, Dr Gosman and Julie



Arrival in New Delhi, we were met by the Indian Christian Mission team.



10 year old boy with contracture release and graft from abdomen. This is an improvised bed with upright position. We placed step stool under the mattress and secured with rope.



involved paperwork needed for trip to India.

Dr. Gosman's group was sponsored by the LEAP Foundation (Life Enhancement Association for People), a Christian Foundation based in Dallas, Texas. There were 25 team members, including Plastic Surgeons, Pediatric Anesthesiologists, OR Nurses and Surgical Technologists, Anesthesia Technicians, Post Anesthesia Care Unit Nurses, an Orthodontist, and other support staff such as Videographers, Photographers, and Telecom Technicians. Members of the team came from all over the United States. Six of us came from San Diego: Dr Gosman, Evelyn Snyder RN, Julie Brueninger, RN (Rady Children's Hospital), Dr Champaneri (Anesthesia), Beth Stevens (Telecom Tech Support) and I.

The trip commenced with a 16hr flight from Chicago to New Delhi, after which we took another 13 hour ride on a sleeper train to Damoh, a very remote place in Central India. We stayed at an orphanage called Central India Christian Mission (CICM). The accommodations were minimal, but the staff at the orphanage took very good care of us. They served us three meals a day and provided laundry service, too.

We had two Operating Rooms at the hospital, a small one for Dr Gosman and a larger OR which was shared by the other 2 surgeons. We performed 78 plastic surgery cases in 4 days. Regretfully there were hundreds of children turned away due to medical conditions that made them poor



Amanda Gosman and Evelyn Snyder at work



2yr. old girl with bilateral cleft lip and palate

surgical candidates. The surgeries were performed with bare minimum supplies and equipment. Because our supplies and instruments were so limited, we learned to be creative and resourceful with what we had available. As our supplies got low, we used Cidex to sterilize the remaining items needed for the surgeries!

The days were long. We worked continuously for 8 -12 hours at a time, often with no breaks. We ate lunch between cases. With all that, it was an unforgettable experience and one that we would not have missed. We had two goals for the trip. Besides helping the needy in this part of the world, we took the opportunity to teach, sharing our surgical experience from the US with our colleagues in India. When nursing students came to observe the surgeries we reinforced the importance of aseptic technique, including scrubbing, gowning and gloving.

Though the work was challenging, it was not all work without play. We were given some time to experience just being in India. We found the Indian people to be very hospitable and enjoyed our interactions, though language was a bit of a challenge since few spoke much English and we spoke little Hindi. For an outing we divided into two groups. One group went to see the Taj Mahal, one of the eight wonders of the world. The

other group traveled back to New Delhi for some shopping in a country very different from our own.

For all of us it was truly a fulfilling trip. We were able to offer our specialized help to patients in need and also to experience a small part of the culture of India.

I am thankful to Dr. Gosman for giving me this opportunity. It was a enriching experience and one that led to soul searching on my part. I was affected emotionally when I met patients and families who traveled from all parts of India by bus or by foot for the opportunity to provide a healing surgery for their loved one. I learned much from them and from the experience in their country, but perhaps the most important thing I learned was to appreciate what I have and to try to take things more slowly. The people we helped in India were very poor, with few possessions, and yet they continued to smile at us the whole time we were there. Their ability to appreciate small things in their lives was very illuminating.

This trip gave me a glimpse of the kind of service-oriented nursing opportunities I have always wanted. Clearly there are so many people doing wonderful things in this world and that realization has inspired me to be a part of something bigger than myself. I still want to make a difference!