

## Lam Chun Him, Matthew (CUHK25) Elective at Green Pastures Hospital, Nepal

Born in a Christian family, I was fortunate to be surrounded by the teachings of the Gospel and the love of God from an early age. However, as I pursue my medical studies, I became increasingly curious about how to integrate my faith into my future career in medicine. Seeking a transformative experience, I decided to venture outside of my comfort zone and embark on a clinical elective at Green Pastures Hospital, a missionary hospital in Pokhara, Nepal. This journey offered me the opportunity to immerse myself in a healthcare environment where the threads of faith, healthcare, and service were intricately woven together.

### The hospital environment

The hospital staff works six days a week, with Saturday being their day off. The working hours were from 9 am in the morning until 4 pm in the afternoon. The Christian staff members would first gather to have a short morning devotion. Afterwards, they would join the others in the morning ward rounds, outpatient clinics or other specific sessions. Throughout the four-weeks elective period, I had the opportunity to rotate through various departments of the hospital, including rehabilitation, palliative care, leprosy and dermatology, as well as ear, nose and throat.

The hospital is less advanced and resourceful compared to the hospital in Hong Kong, but I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the medical and non-medical needs of the less well-off populations. Many patients from rural areas were still struggling with poverty, limited education, poor hygiene conditions, and lack of access to medical services. It was striking to learn that many patients actually came from faraway places, spending a long time on transportation, just to seek treatment for simple conditions like eczema.

It was inspiring to witness how new services were gradually introduced to provide a more comprehensive care. In the rehabilitation department, the second series of classes for hypertensive patients had just begun, with the goal to improve patient awareness of their condition and how lifestyle factors could influence their disease progress. Supervised exercise programmes for cardiovascular rehabilitation were being implemented, with new treadmills filling up the hospital gym. The hospital currently has no acute care department, but I learned that some doctors were already taking acute care lessons in preparation for the future expansion of hospital services. Beyond the hospital setting, I had the opportunity to meet expat doctors who were

working with the government to organize public health projects, aiming to improve healthcare access in the rural areas.

Overall, the elective experience in Nepal had provided me with more exposure about medical work in less developed countries, as well as valuable insights into the introduction of new practices and services in a resource-limited setting.

### **Connection out of isolation**

During my clinical elective, my greatest challenge was being alone. Although the environment was generally safe and supportive, I would always feel a sense of isolation as a foreigner with language and cultural barriers. When the doctors communicate in Nepali, I could only rely on their gestures, facial expressions, and occasional English translations to grasp the meaning of their discussions. Outside the hospital area, I feel unsure of whom to approach and where to seek help. Staying at the guesthouse of a church near the hospital, I encountered language limitations with the staff who could only understand basic English phrases. On another occasion, I met an old man near the guest house, who approached me and seemed to be asking for some help, but I could not understand at all. In the first week, there were times that I almost got lost amidst the mountainous pavements, infrequently interrupted by roaming cows and reckless motorcyclists.

Yet it is in these difficult times that I could experience God. I encountered numerous Christians whose life illuminated Nepal. At the hospital, there was a Christian nurse from Hong Kong, who had been serving in Nepal since the 1990s. Working as the only Chinese in a foreign environment came with many feelings of loneliness and uncertainty, but she had found a deeper understanding of God's comfort. Meeting individuals like her remind me that even in isolation and unfamiliarity, God's light would always be with us, supporting us to act out His love across cultural and geographical boundaries.

During Saturdays, I would join the church service at the church where I resided. Although the church service was conducted in Nepali, the PowerPoint slides provide English translations of the Bible verses and brief summaries of the Pastor's message. The hymns were also in Nepali, but I surprisingly noticed some familiar melodies in some of the hymns. One of the hymns was the Nepali Translation version of 'How Great Thou Art', a popular hymn which had been translated to a variety of languages and dialects worldwide, including a Cantonese version which I was most familiar

with. It was an amazing experience that despite not understanding Nepali, I could sing along with them, experiencing a sense of unity and connection with the local church. Despite our differences in language and tongue, our shared faith unites us as one.

### **The medical mission**

As I reflected on my experience in Nepal, one question continued to linger in my mind, “what makes the difference for Christian doctors?”

The religious culture in Nepal has not always been receptive to Christianity, and the topic of faith remained sensitive outside the church environment. Green Pastures Hospital, founded in 1957 by a group of missionaries, is still operated by the missionary organisation, but now includes both Christian and non-Christian doctors. The hospital’s focus gradually shifted away from direct missionary work, and a clear distinction has been made between medical workers and spiritual workers. The chaplaincy service, once led by foreign missionaries, is now overseen by local Christians. In the present day, both the church and the hospital are undergoing new developments and growth.

During my clinical elective, I got to know a Dutch surgeon, who would travel to Nepal annually to perform surgeries. His Christian faith had influenced his decision to serve those who were marginalised and discriminated against, such as the lepers in Nepal. I had the opportunity to assist him in his surgical procedures, one of them being a nose reconstruction for a leprosy patient with saddle nose deformity. The procedure was mainly for aesthetic purposes, but it carries a profound significance in Nepal, where leprosy is still a cultural stigma. By correcting the deformity, we aimed to facilitate the patient’s reintegration into society.

Witnessing his dedication to serve, I began to understand more about one aspect that sets Christian doctors apart—the motivation to serve the underserved. From the very beginning of Christianity, Jesus had taught us to show compassion and love for those who were marginalised, healing the lepers who were viewed as unclean. The aim to restore not only physical function but also the dignity and social acceptance of patients was a testament to the transformative power of God’s love in medicine, inspiring me to extend my care beyond medical treatment, addressing the psychosocial and spiritual needs of patients.

I also had the chance to join a community visit to a Nepalese teenage girl who had undergone multiple operations for her spinal cord tumour, rendering her wheelchair bound. Despite the plight she faced, she expressed a remarkable sense of resilience and joyfulness. Eventually I learnt that she is a Christian, and throughout her journey, she had never given up the hope of recovery, continuously seeking God's guidance and support through prayer. In her life I found another beautiful testimony of faith.

While the Green Pastures Hospital is no longer directly involved in missionary work, the legacy of Christian compassion and service persists. The hospital continues to provide healthcare to those in need, regardless of their faith or background, embodying God's love.

One evening, when I went up to the church's roof to hang my clothes, I found myself captivated by the glittering mountains of Pokhara, enlightened by the lights of numerous small houses scattered along the hilly terrain, shining like stars in the sky. At that moment, the bible verse of "a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" resonated within me. It was the perfect reminder that there are still countless souls in Nepal and beyond who had never heard of the good news, and we Christians are the ones responsible to spread God's light. I am still unsure about God's plan for my future, and I am still praying for guidance. but I believe that no matter what career path I pursue, I would strive to express God's love, reaching out to the forgotten and the unheard.

