An Uplifting Experience in the Himalayas

Like many of us, gynecologist Lian Yin-shuang finds it tough dragging herself out of bed most mornings. However, her time in northern India awakened very different feelings about getting up for work.

"In Taiwan, the first thing that comes to mind every morning is 'I have to go to work again.' But here, the first thought I wake up with is 'I must keep working for the people here -- let's do it!'."

Lian, of Chung Shan Medical University Hospital, was a member of the Mobile Medical Mission (MMM) to northern India in 2005. Along with her fellow mission members, comprised of volunteers, private practitioners, and a colleague from Chung Shan, she came to Darjeeling with a passion for service as well as the beauty of the Himalayas.

In winter of 2005, the team came to Darjeeling, a place 2,500 meters above sea level, to carry out three-weeks of medical service in the crisp, freezing cold air of this stunning mountain range.

This is a place that has very poor soil, hard living conditions and limited, expensive medical resources. Refugees from Tibet and Nepal, and the original Indian residents depend on irregular visits from medical teams from various countries for healthcare assistance. The quality of medical services is thus low, and the area even lacks a basic medical records system.

On the morning that the MMM was supposed to depart, a boy was brought in by his father for emergency treatment. He was panicking and it was difficult to get a coherent explanation of the child's condition. The moment the boy took off his clothes, the nurses and doctors were shocked. The little boy was burned two weeks before with injuries that covered 35% of his body. The burned skin had been treated in a most unsophisticated way, and as it had been a long time since the bandages were last changed, they were stuck to his inflamed skin very tightly. It was not a pretty sight, to say the least.

This story does not end happily. The boy was transferred to another hospital for his treatment. However, this is only a small part of the whole picture. In the Himalayas, there are many more stories like this, more children to be saved.
The medical staff carefully cleaned the boy's wounds, wrapped him in clean bandages and applied fresh medicine. It took the whole team two hours in relay work to get the job done. During the process, the boy screamed in pain, and some of staff had tears in their eyes because it was hard to watch a little boy go through such an ordeal. What was even harder to deal with was the thought that no one would be able to change the bandages for him after they left. This made the team feel powerless.

In this poor mountain town, the residents have no money to pay for medical care and small wounds often develop into festering ulcers because of ignorance about personal hygiene. Before the MMM arrived, some people even had broken bones for a few months before they were able to receive any medical attention.

Though it is in some ways only a shower after a long drought to these people, the arrival of the MMM at least means that inflamed wounds that have been hurting for a long time can be finally treated. However, after the team leaves, the poor still cannot afford to pay for medical treatment and new wounds will continue to affect them. So it is important to consider how best to build on the results brought about by the MMM, and how to ensure that people who need help actually get it.

The MMM traveled to eight places in the Darjeeling area and provided medical care to 3,656 patients. Each doctor saw an average of over 100 patients a day. The workload was heavy and the pharmacist even had to work overtime to do the inventories for medical supplies. Even so, everybody worked in high-spirits and nobody ever looked tired. The satisfaction felt by the workers was beyond words, especially when some non-English-speaking patients managed to say "Thank you."

The smiling faces of the locals were the best rewards for the members of the Darjeeling MMM. Seeing such courage and friendliness in the face of adversity gives them the impetus to spread their love to every corner of the world. In the words of team member Yang Ting-xuan: "We are no longer sure who is helping whom. We help them to improve their external medical environment and they help uplift our souls."