Facing Afflictions With a Smile

It takes a day and a half to fly from Taiwan to Tuvalu. In September 2006, a Mobile Medical Mission (MMM) organized by Chung Shan Medical University Hospital was dispatched to this nation in the southwestern Pacific. They wanted to prove that “Love knows no distance.”

The MMM’s time in the island nation will doubtless stay in the memories of the team members, as well as the happy-go-lucky Tuvaluans. During their 10 days there, staff successfully dealt with a number of serious cases and were amazed by the positive attitudes of the locals.

The Princess Margaret Hospital on the second largest island of Tuvalu, Funafuti, has sufficient supplies, but only three local doctors and two Filipino doctors. Though they are skilled professionals, they simply cannot handle the volume of patients they receive, and the management of the hospital still needs to be improved.

The arrival of the team from Taiwan provided an energy boost. Together with the resident staff, they formed the most effective surgical team that Tuvalu has ever seen. Even the most seriously ill patients, declared unsuitable by hospitals in Fiji, regained their health thanks to the healing hands of the doctors from Taiwan.

One woman of around 40, who weighed 116 kilograms, was suffering from a lower abdominal tumor. She was sent to Fiji, approximately two hours away by plane, for surgery, but the doctors there refused to perform the surgery because she was diagnosed with coronary heart disease. So she was flown back to Tuvalu, by which time the tumor had grown so big that it was putting extreme pressure on her large intestines. She would have been in critical danger if the tumor had not been removed immediately.

Wang Sso-ray, the team’s doctor of internal medicine, examined her and concluded that the diagnosis of heart disease was incorrect. Still, the 12-centimeter layer of fat in her abdomen would make surgery difficult. Finally, the tumor was removed and there was relief that this tricky
piece of surgery had been a success. The news soon spread, and Tuvalu President Apisai Ielemia gave a public address to recognize the outstanding performance of the Taiwanese doctors.

Kidney stones and diabetes are common diseases in Tuvalu, and because diabetes sufferers are more prone to sepsisemia, poor personal hygiene can often cause minor wounds to become life-threatening. Many patients have to undergo amputation to prevent the continued spread of infecction.

During the period the team was stationed there, too amputation was called for almost every day for two to three people. But the patients took these losses with the astounding courage and cheerfulness so indicative of the Tuvaluan spirit.

Wang Shao-chen, a surgeon from the urological department in charge of amputations, found that nobody actually made a noise when he cleaned their wounds. Instead, they gave the doctor their best smiles. A grandfather, who was also an amputee due to diabetes and septicemia, even brought a guitar to the hospital. He lay in bed, playing and singing happily to entertain himself and everyone. Rather than possessing the demeanor and attitude of a sick old man, he looked more like a happy child.

Yet perhaps the word “bravery” is a simplistic explanation of the reactions of the people of Tuvalu. Some of the team felt that they were just manifesting the best side of human nature. For example, there were no painkillers for mothers in labor, but they knew naturally what to do and how to nurse their children. Tuvaluans seemed to follow their instincts and the rhythms of life when they were confronted with potentially fatal situations.

Similarly, Helen Suen, a doctor of pediatrics, observed that because medical supplies are very limited in Tuvalu, when a person comes down with a cold they are often just advised by the doctor to take care of themselves, and sent home for rest. This is very different from Taiwan, where most people take medicine for even the most minor symptoms. Perhaps, Suen reflected, there is much we can learn from these hardy people.