

Elective in Cambodia Q&A



Sarah and Chovvy, one of the sponsored students

My name's Sarah and I'm currently entering my final year of study at Sheffield Dental School. This Spring, with the support of CDF, I was given the opportunity to travel to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to volunteer with a Christian charity One-2-One as part of my dental elective. While there, I spent my weekdays working 8-5 in the charity's dental clinic, providing regular check-ups to children receiving treatment for cleft lip and palate at the national paediatric hospital, alongside other Cambodian dental students from the local university. When I wasn't working, I spent my time living alongside students sponsored by One-2-One (who fund their university fees) and exploring the city of Phnom Penh.

Which was your favourite part of your elective and which part was the most challenging?

Without a doubt, the friends I've made. Instead of backpacking with the rest of my coursemates, I had made the somewhat risky decision to travel to Cambodia alone for the full six weeks of my elective, in the hopes that I would get a realistic taste of what overseas dental mission looks like. I love an adventure and was excited to travel solo for the first time, but was also very fearful that I

would spend the full six weeks in Phnom Penh completely isolated and alone. Thankfully, stepping out of my comfort zone was the best decision I could've made. Without the comfort of my home friends, I was forced to pick up the local language and socialise to survive... and befriended some of the kindest and friendliest people I've ever met. The staff and students welcomed me with open arms, and we spent many evenings laughing over our cultural differences, my poor Khmer (national language) pronunciation, and whichever Cambodian rap artist had released a new music video.

I was even lucky enough to spend a weekend travelling across the country with two of the students, Chomraean and Chovvy, and explore some of Cambodia's ancient temples; spending the weekend getting to know those girls is a memory I'll never forget.

While exploring cultural differences was one of the greatest joys of my trip, it was also one of the greatest challenges, especially regarding dentistry. Cambodian people have faced an incredible amount of trauma over recent years (following a national genocide in the late 1970s) and this, combined with the cultural Buddhist belief that pain should be tolerated, not acknowledged, meant that the children I treated were able to endure a lot more dental treatment than those in the UK - something that I found rather a shock! I distinctly remember showing up to the dental clinic on one of my first days not knowing what to expect - and witnessing a tearful 8-year-old having a lower 6 extracted under local anaesthetic; I nearly turned around and went straight back to airport! That said, over time I came to understand and appreciate the differences in clinical practices, and while there were some that I doubt would catch on in the UK, I also learnt many valuable lessons that I wouldn't have gained had I stayed at home.



What did you learn about yourself while you were there?

Just how much I value soft skills as a clinician! I've known since starting my course that my interests lie far more in building and maintaining strong patient relationships than constructing restorations with perfect aesthetic detail. However, it was only on coming to a new country where my verbal communication was all but taken away from me, bar a few choice phrases, that I was able to appreciate just how much of an impact being able to verbally interact with my patients has - on my role as a dentist, and also job satisfaction! The role of communication falling primarily onto the rest of the dental team forced me to focus on my clinical skills, and while I found it difficult to battle with feelings of inadequacy (especially surrounded by other much more proficient Cambodian students), the experience was a great chance to reflect on how much greater the role of a dentist is than the physical job on hand, and the importance of non-verbal communication in building understanding and rapport. It has shown me that I'd love to focus on a role where patient relationships are paramount (maybe community dentistry or special care), but also that I'd love to return to Phnom Penh in the future with a set of vocabulary that extends past 'open your mouth please' and 'spit'!



Visiting Pre Rup temple

What did you learn about God?

That He is faithful. I had so many fears before setting off to Cambodia, regarding loneliness, clinical inadequacy, and future planning - and I wasn't trusting God with any of them. One of my greatest struggles as a Christian has been letting go of the control I hold over my life and surrendering it to Christ. While I know that His plan for the world is good and perfect, I often fall into the selfish trap of fearing that His way won't work in *my* best interest, that I will be side-lined or forgotten. In the months before the trip, I had spent hours planning and calculating how I wanted the next few years of my life to pan out; but it took sitting alone in my room every night, completely separated from the busyness of life back home, to see how little of it I had trusted to Him. Despite my lack of faith however, over the trip, He answered my daily prayers again and again. When I feared I would be friendless and alone, He gave me a wonderful community of people who daily pointed me to Him. When I worried that my clinical skills were inadequate, He gave me compassionate supervisors to encourage me, and opportunities to serve with skills I felt more established in. I even had one night where I was really missing playing my guitar... and one of the students spontaneously showed up at the guesthouse with a guitar case strapped to his back! God showed me in all my little prayers that He was worthy of my trust, and that if He delivered in all the little things, maybe I could trust Him in the big unknowns too.

What is one thing you want to remember from your elective?

How *universal* our faith is. One of the greatest joys of the trip was being able to travel halfway across the world - and find a congregation that shared many of the strengths and struggles of my own church back home. I found myself reflecting a lot on Psalm 103, especially verse 12: "...as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us", and was deeply moved meeting Christians on the other side of the globe who were just as passionate about living their lives for Christ. I was especially struck by this during my final week at church when, unbeknownst to me, one of the tech team

had added English subtitles underneath all the worship lyrics so I was able to sing along with the rest of the congregation. As I joined in, I was reminded of just how many Christians from different nations and time periods have sung of God's grace before us, how similar we are as broken human beings, and just how much He cares about each and every one of us; I hope it is something I never forget.

How can we pray for the place where you did your elective?

Thank you for offering to pray! Here are a couple of prayer points for the staff and students of One-2-One:

Praise God for the work of One-2-One, and all they do to serve and demonstrate Christ's love to their local community. Please pray for Mr. Huy and the rest of team, that they would continue to have a zeal for the work they do, especially as they meet to consider new ways they can serve those in need locally with sustainable development practices. Pray also for the staff at One-2-One's outreach programmes; for Dr. Nech and the staff at Happy Dental Clinic, and for teacher Srey Ma and her students at the local slum education programme.

Pray for the sponsored students as they carry out their summer exams, that their hard work will pay off, but also that they remember that their worth is found, not in their grades, but in Christ. Pray especially for Chomraean as she studies for her final year nursing exams! Finally, please pray for the people that One-2-One are serving. Pray that they would receive the help that they need, but also that in seeing the team's love for Christ, they may come to know Him and the love He has for them for themselves.

I would like to thank all at CDF who have supported me in this trip, be it in financial support, prayerful calls or in-person encouragement - it has meant a lot! I do not know what the future holds for me regarding overseas dentistry, but am hopeful that I will return to Cambodia again soon, and know without a doubt that this trip will impact my faith and the way I practice for the rest of my lifetime.

Sarah Wallace

5th Year Dental Student, Sheffield