International clinical placement for nursing students has sometimes cynically been described as ‘clinical tourism’ – a situation where students and academics take a vacation whilst providing incidental ‘drop-in’ health care. This was not the case for 18 students and three academics from the Logan, Nathan and Gold Coast campuses of Griffith University undertaking a placement for the course ‘Community Health and diversity’ in Laos. The learning objective for the students was to gain an understanding of primary health care delivery, within a community development project, by participating in a range of health promotion and education activities and illness prevention strategies. The learning experience overall however, was beyond expectation and life changing.

Selection for this international placement was based on expression of interest, academic merit and ability to self-fund the trip. As a placement setting, Laos is ideal. Laos is considered to be one of the 10 poorest nations in the world with the majority of its population having no access to adequate health care, housing and sanitation. At present it is in its early phase of rebuilding from the ravages of war and geographical isolation, with community projects taking place in various parts of the country. One such project is the Seuang River Valley Community Development project, two hours north of Luang Prabang, which focuses on a sustainable future for the mountain people in 12 villages (almost half live below the poverty line). An offshoot of this project is community health care. Through the assistance of volunteers, this entailed the development of programs such as health education for basic sanitation, data collection and monitoring prenatal health checks, school health education and developing a community medicine box. The purpose was to establish long-term health care goals with students initiating and supporting the programs. To achieve this, the students lived in arranged home-stay accommodation in one of the villages, becoming part of that family for three weeks. Immersion in the culture meant students socialised with family members, which then quickly developed into strong bonds with close exchanges of humour, language, culture and information about health. As one student said “the love, acceptance and kindness was so amazing. We walked into their lives as strangers, yet we left as a family member”.

Setting up and running three primary health care clinics (mother and baby; children; and adult) in the classrooms of the local schools in the Seuang River Valley District was a daily challenge with no electricity, running water, clinical equipment and other amenities that are taken for granted in Australia. Many villagers waited for hours to be seen. A throughput of 180 people on any one day was not altogether unusual. They came out of curiosity, but several also sought help for minor acute conditions including toothache, ear infection, diarrhoea, backache and major chronic illnesses such as vitamin B and iron deficiencies, untreated farm work related injuries, cardiovascular disease and arthritis. The majority of the locals had never seen a doctor in their lives. It was the first time that Western health workers came to their district. Lecturer Hazel Rands, of Griffith University, remarked: “students had to utilise a much higher level of clinical assessment and critical thinking skills than in...”

Going the extra miles for health promotion

By Dr Elizabeth Emmanuel MRCNA and Hazel Rands MRCNA, Associate Lecturer, Griffith University
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Students were involved in a variety of health care and health promotion activities.