

## **Global Maternity Health - Griffith Midwifery students visit Laos**

### Author

Rands, Hazel, Gleeson, Danielle

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## INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

# GLOBAL MATERNITY HEALTH - GRIFFITH MIDWIFERY STUDENTS VISIT LAOS

DANIELLE GLEESON RM IBCLC - MIDWIFERY LECTURER FROM GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

**The topic of global midwifery is an important inclusion in midwifery education but it can be difficult for students to be anything more than 'textbook tourists'. Griffith University has attempted to address this theory –practice gap through an elective course Rural and International Midwifery Practice. This course provides an opportunity for midwifery students to gain knowledge and experience through immersion in a rural or international setting and is of particular interest to students who are considering future midwifery work outside of large Australian cities.**

The placement provides a platform for midwifery students to explore practice in rural, remote and international areas with regard to their role and scope of practice. The placement extends and consolidates students' development of the ANMC competency standards for the midwife in all domains. By undertaking this course midwifery students are provided with the opportunity to develop their understanding of global health issues, the social determinants of health, midwifery in the global context, cultural competence, community development and sustainable midwifery.

In January of this year a small cohort of senior midwifery students undertook an international placement in Laos. Laos is one of the poorest Asian countries, scarred by war, with a large proportion of their people living below the poverty line with little or no access to health care. The students were immediately struck by the poverty as they took up their accommodation in village home stays and proceeded to immerse themselves in the Laos culture.

Despite the poverty, Griffith students have always received warm, generous and grateful welcome by the Lao villagers. This was the third year that Griffith, in partnership with Antipodeans Abroad, has supported

midwifery students to travel to Laos. The relationships with local health workers, translators and villagers has been developed and strengthened every year.

Along with a cohort of nursing students and two lecturers, the students travelled to remote villages and set up health clinics, often in bamboo schoolrooms or open shelters. As the general aim and focus of the placement was on providing primary health care, the students started their clinics with health promotion activities with the women of the village. Lay midwives and pregnant women were eager participants in the sessions, along with the majority of women from the village.

Topics covered included: nutrition, staying healthy in pregnancy, labour, birth, breastfeeding and care of sick babies. Students were excited to hear that nearly all Laos babies are breastfed to two years and delayed cord clamping is routine. However, they were saddened to learn that breech and shoulder dystocia babies often die during childbirth. Hearing this sad statistic encouraged the students to demonstrate what they had learnt about assisting and managing obstetric emergencies.

In the clinics midwifery students were able to lead antenatal assessments, newborn checks, fertility education and even provide grief counselling. Learning was always mutual between the students and the villagers and communication issues were overcome with the help of demonstrations, humour and some local translators. Overall the students' understanding of midwifery in the global context improved significantly and their passion for improving women's health on an international level was strengthened.

During the three week placement over 1000 Lao villagers accessed the clinics for assessment and treatment; many of whom had not accessed health care previously. On returning to Australia, feedback from the midwifery students confirmed that this placement was enriching, inspiring and life-changing. Further, this style of placement assisted students' learning about being resourceful, reading body language, addressing personal beliefs, cultural sensitivity and interdisciplinary collaboration.

"I have learnt so much more from this placement than I even expected. It has been great to see how these women use what little they have to care for themselves in labour and then their babies after birth. The whole community gets involved and helps."

"Learning to use non-verbal communication and to read the villagers' body language has really helped me in my assessment. I've also learned that laughing together can break down any communication barrier." ■

