

I embarked on my Summer Global Health Experience in Taiwan on July 4th, 2011, starting a four-week program to explore medicine and healthcare in Taiwan. My first stop was in Taichung, in which I spent two weeks learning the basic theory behind Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), practicing and trying out different TCM therapies and shadowing TCM doctors at the China Medical University Hospital.

Our TCM lessons at China Medical University (CMU) were very interesting and thought-provoking. Ever since I was a child, I have been curious about TCM. Why were my parents willing to get needles stuck all over their body? Why did I have to drink this bitter herbal soup when I have a cold? Does fire-cupping burn and do the red marks it leaves hurt? I was able to get answers to my myriad of questions from the lectures at CMU. I learned about the theories of qi and the meridians, the pathways through which qi travel, and how these theories help TCM physicians design their treatment plans for patients. I also had the opportunity to experience and practice various TCM diagnostic techniques such as pulse taking and observing the face and tongue, and TCM therapies such as cupping, acupuncture, tui na (a form of massage therapy) and moxibustion.



Left: China Medical University, where we had our lessons in TCM

Top Right: Learning how to take a pulse

Bottom Right: David Tsai is performing fire cupping therapy on me. It actually feels rather good despite what the scary red marks may make it out to seem.



My experience with acupuncture was an unforgettable one. I was initially very anxious and hesitant to get a needle inserted into my body, but since I wanted the experience, I volunteered to be the “patient” and help the professor with his demonstration on how to insert an acupuncture needle properly. So, I allowed a needle to pierce me at an acupuncture point below my left knee. Surprisingly, there was not the sharp pain that I expected; instead, I felt a strange numbing feeling radiating down my leg from the needle’s site of insertion. After the needle was removed, the muscles of my leg ached with soreness similar to the feeling you get after an intense workout. Then, the professor told the class to partner up and practice on each other. I couldn’t help but let out a nervous chuckle when I heard that. It is one thing to have a trained professional stick a needle in me, but it is a whole new level to have a fellow classmates whose experience with acupuncture was limited to an hour of practice, sticking needles through sheets of paper and a cushion. Ultimately, we were all able to get past our anxiety, and allowed each other to perform and receive acupuncture.



Left: My first acupuncture experience. Look at how anxious I was.

Right: The cushion we used to practice acupuncture.



At the CMU hospital, I shadowed doctors in the internal medicine and traumatology departments. Using a combination of acupuncture, cupping, and moxibustion, the TCM doctors treated patients with conditions such as stroke, Bell's palsy, cerebral palsy, osteoarthritis, ankle sprains, back pain and more. After seeing a number of patients with the doctors, I started to recognize different patterns of acupuncture points and the specific conditions they are used to treat. In the traumatology department, doctors treated patients who mainly had musculoskeletal problems and used more tui na and herbal medicine patches to treat their patients.



Left: I'm practicing proper pulse-taking technique on David Tsai at the CMU hospital.

Right: Class trip to the Sun Ten Pharmacy. We met a lot of students from CMU during our two-week stay.



After two weeks, my classmates and I flew to Hualien to visit Tzu Chi University hospital and observe how Buddhist values of love and compassion were integrated into medical education and patient care. On the first two days, I shadowed Dr. Wong of the family medicine department at Tzu Chi University Hospital, who was in charge of hospice care at the hospital. Hospice care in Tzu Chi University Hospital was very similar to that of New Jersey; the care was very patient-centered and the hospital staff was very caring and compassionate. I was especially inspired by the nurse with whom I made home visits to see patients. She had a strong and well-established rapport with all of her patients, and her patients would give a big hearty smile when they spoke with her. Moreover, I traveled up the mountainside in a mobile unit to a health center that provides care to the indigenous people living on the mountains, who often had difficulty going to the city to receive treatment. At the health centers, I was able to practice taking a clinical history in mandarin. Thanks to this experience, I, now, feel more confident in my medical mandarin skills, and what I learned and practiced at this health center continues to help me to this day as I organize lessons and facilitate classes as a Medical Mandarin Non-Credit Elective coordinator. Furthermore, I was thoroughly impressed by the values of Tzu Chi Foundation and the volunteer work that they do, and I encourage everyone to learn more about this organization and the incredible contributions that they have made around the world.



Left: Tzu-Chi University Hospital

Right: Anatomy lab in Tzu Chi University where medical students and residents can practice various surgical techniques.



I spent my last week in Taipei, visiting the National Taiwan University Hospital, the top hospital of Taiwan. At the hospital, I had the amazing opportunity to shadow a neonatologist, physicians in the ER and physicians in the ICU. With the neonatologist, I was able to see a lot of babies. I also visited the NICU and saw a lot of my fellow preemies. "Wow, I, too, used to be this small," I would think to myself as I watched the babies in the NICU sleep peacefully in their plastic incubators. Following the physicians in the ER and ICU was also an interesting experience. I was able to see a variety of cases which included fractured bones, hypoglycemia, tonsillitis, pain due to endometriosis, deep cuts in the hand, GI bleeding and more. The ambience, especially in the ICU, was fast-paced and intense. In addition to my clinical experiences, I also visited the Department of Health to learn more about Taiwan's National Healthcare, and spent an afternoon at the cardiology catheter lab, speaking with two Robert Wood Johnson Medical School alumni. It was great listening to their experience in medical school and as physicians in Taiwan.



Left: David Hammer improves his surgical skills as he practices maneuvering instruments designed for laparoscopic surgery.

Middle: I attempt to suture a sheet of cloth using hemostats designed for laparoscopic surgery

Right: The famous National Taiwan University Hospital

This four-week program was a fun and valuable learning experience for me. It was my first time in Taiwan, and I will never forget this trip. In addition to this the planned activities from this program, my classmates and I had a lot of fun after classes and during the weekends. We went to night markets, concerts, beaches, famous tourist sites, themed restaurants, sport centers, movie theaters, dessert shops, museums, and much more. Therefore, this trip has also been a very rewarding cultural experience too. So I highly recommend this program to future medical students. You will have an experience of a lifetime!



Yum Yum Yum