

Himalayan Health Exchange Lahaul 2008

Lahaul is located in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, deep within the Himalayan Mountains. Dirt roads and colorful trucks are the only means of access, and some areas are so far removed that they must prepare for lengthy times of isolation during the winter months. Yet all this has only nurtured one thing: a people devout to their traditions, and their culture, who welcome strangers with open arms.



We arrived in New Delhi and from there spent the next 4 days traveling. As we drove further and further north, we noticed that both dress and people changed. Up here, in the remote locations of the mountains, Tibetan, Nepalese, Pakistani, and Indian cultures seemed to blend into one; the distinctively colorful Indian dress gave way to the more subdued hues of Tibetan robes, and Hindu temples reside alongside a plethora of Buddhist monasteries.

The next 10 days were spent sleeping in tents, exploring the surrounding area on short hikes, and tending to the sick villagers. Clinics were set up either in a hospital or clinic building where available or simply under large tarp-like tents. Except for a few



residents, attendings, and dental students, all other team members were first-year medical students. Yet after about one day we were no longer treated as such: with the help of a translator we attempted to gain insight into the patient's chief complaint, attempt a diagnosis and treatment plan, and then present it all to one of the physicians. For those three weeks, we acted as fourth year medical students, and watched our own transformation in amazement. The confidence I personally gained in my physical diagnosis skills – which on this trip were limited so such tools as a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, and my own two hands – will serve me well during my second year and beyond. I learned how to diagnose lobar pneumonia, differentiate between rheumatoid and age-related arthritis, and see the results of a dislocated shoulder, which had not been reduced in over 20 years; and most importantly, I understood what it means to work within and alongside a patient's culture: our limited number of drugs meant we had to rely on educating patients on how to perform proper stretches for low back pain or adjust their eating habits to combat GERD within the limits of their diet. And along the entire way it was amazing to feel the appreciation and thankfulness that the patients brought to us in return.

