

Ravi Sadhu- A Trip to Nepal

NRO is a non-profit NGO run entirely by women. The primary aim of the organization is to bring international volunteers to work in villages and cities in Nepal. Volunteers engage in programs such as education, medicine, literacy, environment and social service. NRO helps bridge that gap between local government organizations, schools etc. and volunteers. Through NRO, I was posted in a village called Bhardeu where I worked at a government run primary health clinic called the health post. In the health post, there are free medicines provided for many general conditions such as fever, diarrhea, COPD etc. Apart from providing medicines, the Bhardeu health post offers free normal birth delivery services and contraceptive services for women and men. Cut and injury cases are also supervised at the health post.

I was in the city of Kathmandu for about 3 weeks. For the first week, I was given culture and language classes. I was taught some basic phrases and vocabulary. I also volunteered in the ER Department for 2 weeks. In the ER Department, my main role was observing and learning, and interacting with patients. While doctors and nurses may be heavily involved in looking at scans and planning a diagnosis, the role of the volunteer is extremely crucial. I was there to inform the staff of the patient's wellbeing; whether the NS was over, or any patient was suddenly experiencing pain. Patients in the hospital often mistook me as a doctor, which is why they would often tell me their complaints, which I would point out to the staff. This was an advantage to the staff who would neglect such issues at times. Though I was in the ER for a short period, there were challenges I faced. The first was a lack of training. I unfortunately could not help out with treating any patients directly because I was only an undergraduate student. It was rather irritating for me to simply watch and learn at times. In retrospect, I am incredibly happy that that was the case. This gave me an exciting opportunity to learn and observe. I learnt so many things by being curious about reading scans such as the x-ray, learning about treatment options for poison cases or stroke, or even about basic physiology. If I was too busy worrying about where I could gain practical experience, I would have lost out on the learning process.

The time that I spent in the village was a totally different story. In the Bhardeu health post, my main aim was to gain hands on experience, learn but also apply what I learnt and help out in any way that I can. In the health post, I performed many duties. I wrote English and Nepali records for patients of any complaint. I helped check patients' vital signs such as blood pressure, respiratory rate etc. I helped the health post with preparing reports to submit to the health ministry. These reports include information about patients' demographics, what key diseases were common in the village etc. In the health post, I was of great help because I was willing to take the initiative and help in whatever way was required. Unlike the city where everyone has fixed work timings, there were many days where only one nurse was on duty, especially on Saturday. I helped doing a lot of the work that another staff member would otherwise do in such situations.

A major highlight in Bhardeu was the outreach clinic. The outreach clinic is an initiative by the health post. Every month, a staff member will visit one out of nine wards and see patients in the house of the female health volunteer of that ward. It was such a nice experience going to ward number 2 with a senior nurse. There, we saw few old patients who couldn't otherwise walk to the health post themselves. They had conditions ranging from COPD to urine retention. Furthermore, some women who were embarrassed to ask about contraceptives in the health post came to the female health volunteer's house and asked questions to the senior nurse in confidence. Overall, only about 15 patients were seen in 3 hours, but it was such a great experience to take the initiative to reach out to patients ourselves and come to them, rather than them coming to us. This experience represents to me how I want my future career in Medicine

to be like. I want to take the initiative and reach out to help other people out. Working in a hospital and seeing patients is undoubtedly nice, but putting myself in the field and reaching out to communities to understand their issues at the grassroots level and help solve them, is far more satisfying.

There were however many challenges I faced in the village. Firstly, it was village people trusting me. Since writing records involved a lot of patient interaction, I initially struggled because many patients would ignore me both in and out of the health post. It was natural that I wouldn't be acknowledged because nobody knew anything about me. I realized that being a knowledgeable health care provider is not enough. I have to open up, be warm and let people know me better if they should trust me. I subsequently tried talking to people more outside of work, and remembering their names. Another challenge I faced was the language barrier, another reason why I was potentially ignored by the villagers. Even though I picked up Nepali towards the end, I started out knowing little Nepali and no Tamang, the predominant language spoken there. It was hard to communicate even with the staff, who would get irritated when they tried talking to me but I couldn't understand. I have realized that being culturally sensitive is very important if you want to work in rural areas or with local communities. You have to have a basic understanding of their language, culture, problems etc. In order to help them in any way, you have to understand them well or be one of them. I will keep this in mind before I attempt to volunteer in a rural area in the future. Other challenges included accepting certain "questionable" medical practices such as no anesthetic given during suturing and lack of sterilization while cleaning wounds. While western allopathic medicine is very meticulous and tailored to each patient, medicine in developing countries focuses on providing treatment quickly for a large population. Over time, I have come to realize that there are multiple systems that efficiently work in different circumstances. One could be safer than the other, but that doesn't discount the effectiveness of the other.

To be honest, I personally was getting slightly demotivated about doing premed at CMC. My first semester was not at all good for me academically, and I felt like I was doing intro biology and chemistry courses mechanically. Through this internship, I have received so much inspiration to satisfy my future career goals in medicine. I now eagerly look forward to getting done with my premed requirements. Somewhere along the line, I forgot how much I loved learning more about Medicine and volunteering in a healthcare setting. A special moment was visiting the NICU in the local hospital I was volunteering at in Kathmandu. I've always been extremely passionate about working with neonates, so it was a dream come true to visit the NICU! I have far less doubts about pursuing a career in Medicine, and I have created plans to carry out my own initiative to work with children in rural areas.

Apart from realizing potential future career goals, I have learnt that I am capable of adjusting to new places and unfamiliar situations with patience. Living in a village with no Wi-Fi and basic facilities was not bad at all after some time. I have also learnt that one though I am introverted and quiet, I must be willing to open up to people for them to get to know me. Over time I got better at small talk and developed better relations with people professionally and personally. I will never forget this place and the amazing things I learnt and experienced in Nepal. I am so grateful for everything Bhardu and Kathmandu gave me. In retrospect, not a single day, especially in the village, was perfect and effortless. But I am so happy it was that way. Nepal has challenged me, but made me much more comfortable with certain situations. I have lived in a house with no Wi-Fi and television for 5 weeks. I have tried my level best to be inquisitive and curious about things and take the initiative to speak up to be given more work and opportunities. I tried my best to learn the local language and engage with people. I have learnt patience, how to not focus on the negatives of every situation, and how to open up a bit more. For all these reasons, I'm extremely thankful for this internship!