Mae Tao Clinic: A Clinic in Exile

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Mae Tao Clinic, Mae Sot, Thai-Burmese border

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First impressions…
On the first day of my elective I left Mae Sot, described by Lonely Planet as a “scruffy border town preoccupied with trading and cross border traffic” and cycled along the dusty highway in the direction of the Thai-Burmese border. I was surrounded by paddy fields which would stretch as far as the eye can see, were it not for the lush green Burmese mountains looming in the background. I recall thinking what a beautiful country Burma must be. I cycled through the gates to the clinic to find a hotchpotch of crumbling concrete buildings and what can only be described as utter bedlam! Hundreds of men, women, children and stray dogs buzzed around me, seemingly with no idea where they were going. Trucks pushed through the rabble, babies screamed, cockerels crowed and dogs barked. On the surface, Mae Tao Clinic appeared to be one of the most chaotic places I have ever set foot. But for some reason, I instantly loved it and couldn’t wait to get started. Right then, I had no idea of the impact that Mae Tao Clinic, and the amazing people that I would later meet, were going have on me and the way that I view medicine.

Parenting class outside the reproductive health inpatient department

Background

Mae Tao Clinic was founded in 1989 by Dr. Cynthia Maung, five months after fleeing a brutal military crackdown in Burma. Burma’s political history is complicated to say the least...

In 1962, the Burmese military took control of Burma and began a military campaign against ethnic minorities such as the Karen people. The military gradually pushed back the resistance armies to the borders, taking territory, burning villages, killing and raping thousands in their path. From 1975 onwards, there has been a steady stream of refugees across the border into Thailand.
In 1988 students and activists organised a pro-democracy uprising in the capital of Burma, Rangoon. Unfortunately, thousands of demonstrators were killed and the rest were forced to flee. Dr. Cynthia was one of them and she crossed the Thai-Burmese border to Mae Sot with a small group of Burmese students. Together they opened a makeshift clinic in a rickety old wooden house just outside the town. They had no money or supplies, and Dr. Cynthia was the only medically trained member of staff.

Mae Tao Clinic stands on the same plot of land today but has grown considerably in size. Over the last 20 years the clinic has gained international recognition and become a comprehensive community health centre with an annual turnover of over 90,000 patients. The clinic is also a hub for regional health training with 1000+ former students working in the surrounding area on both sides of the border, serving villages, schools and refugee camps. For some of the more remote areas inside Burma, the clinic’s former students represent the only source of medical care.

Since the clinics foundation in 1989, the political situation in Burma has not improved. Recent events such as the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007, where 100,000 monks and unarmed civilians demonstrated against the military dictatorship, and Cyclone Nargis in 2008, have in fact made matters much worse. In 2009 it was estimated that over a million people had been displaced from their homes and many were subject to gross human rights violations. Only last week an estimated 30,000 refugees crossed the border into Thailand due to fighting associated with the recent election. Currently, there are around 150,000 people living in refugee camps in Thailand.

The reproductive health department has grown significantly since the clinics foundation. In 1990 there were only 6 deliveries but in 2008 there were 2433 deliveries. Reproductive health has always been central to the clinic’s mission and staff wear shirts emblazoned with the message “For a good future, do something good for mothers and children.”

Community health worker trainees completing their 3 month reproductive health rotation
Lessons learnt...

Where to begin! I hope it is not cliché to say that I have learnt more about real clinical practice in my 7 weeks at Mae Tao Clinic than I have in 5 years at medical school. At the clinic the only investigations we could perform were: malaria slides, haemoglobin levels and at a real push the very occasional full blood count or blood slide. This forced me to rely almost entirely on the patient history and examination to make a diagnosis and the experience has improved my examination and diagnostic skills immeasurably. It goes without saying that I saw many conditions that I have never encountered in the UK, such as septic abortions, breech deliveries and pregnant women suffering with malaria and Dengue fever. Even patients with conditions that I thought I knew well, such as pre-eclampsia, had signs and symptoms that I had only read about in textbooks. This was because often the condition was far more advanced and undertreated than anything we would see in the UK.

The most important thing that I have learnt is that being a doctor is so much more than clinical practice. Reproductive health is as much about advocacy, defending human rights, community development and female empowerment, as it is about plain medicine. In many ways I left Mae Tao Clinic thinking that it was ahead of its time. Since the 1980’s they have placed a huge emphasis on self-sufficient community medicine. They have developed excellent training programmes and outreach teams. They do not rely on foreign health workers to plug the gap, as so many NGOs in war torn countries sadly do.

It has been a true privilege to have felt a part of Mae Tao Clinic, even if it was for such a short length of time. One day, I hope to return to Mae Tao Clinic when I am more skilled and feel I have more to offer to the clinic. I have been greatly moved by the stories I have heard and truly inspired by both the staff and patients that I have encountered. Each and every one of them has overcome more adversity in their life than I could ever imagine and they are the most amazingly strong and courageous women I have ever met.

References

- Mae Tao Clinic. From rice cooker to autoclave at Dr. Cynthia’s Mae Tao Clinic. MTC 2010