

Cambodia: A Place with People Who will Stay in Our Hearts Forever

By Laken Wilson, Lauren Howey, KaoShoua Lee, Jade Williams, and Tracy Frame

As in all pharmacy curriculums, students are required to complete advanced pharmacy practice experiences in the last year of the program. At Belmont University College of Pharmacy, we were blessed to have been chosen as four of the pharmacy students in our class to join 16 healthcare professional students on a medical mission trip to Cambodia. Cambodia is located in the southern portion of the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.¹ The official religion there is Buddhism. Cambodia is still in the process of recovering from a genocide that was carried out by the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot between 1974 and 1979 in which an estimated one and a half million people died.¹ During this time, the citizens were not allowed to have any form of individualism. Religion, colorful clothing, glasses, education, and different professions were all banned and could result in death if anyone decided to partake in them. The Khmer Rouge rationed everyone's food supply and forced the civilians to perform manual, hard labor every day in the fields in order to receive food, shelter, and clothing. If you would like to learn more about Cambodia's history, there are some good resources available. We recommend the book titled, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*² by Loung Ung; and the movie titled, *The Killing Fields*³ by Rolland Joffe. Due to the genocide, the country faces numerous socio-political challenges such as widespread poverty, pervasive corruption, lack of political freedoms, low human development, and a high rate of hunger.

Our team of healthcare professionals from Belmont University was composed of four doctor of pharmacy students, ten undergraduate nursing students, a master of science in nursing student, a doctor of nursing student, an adjunct pharmacy faculty member, and three nursing faculty members. The team was in Cambodia for over three weeks during May and June 2017. Belmont University partnered with Freedom's Promise,⁴ Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope⁵ and local missionaries to provide wellness screenings, health clinics for acute care issues, and services in the hospital. The team started in Phnom Penh (the capital of Cambodia), then traveled to Poipet (a town near the Thailand border), then to Siem Reap (a popular resort town close to the Angkor Wat region) and finally back to Phnom Penh. Throughout the entire trip, our team was able to serve over 600 patients (approximately 200 adults and 400 children), providing them with medical treatment as well as spreading the Gospel. In this article we would like to share our four stories of the impact this trip had on us and how it has forever changed our lives and worldview – not only as healthcare professionals, but personally as well.

The Patients and Pharmacists of Cambodia

Lauren Howey

I am so grateful for this once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit Cambodia and serve the people. My time in Cambodia has changed my life forever. Being able to experience another country and its culture is something I feel that everyone should have the opportunity to do. We were welcomed with open arms by the people of Cambodia, who were all so appreciative that we were there. My experiences in Cambodia helped me put into perspective how much we take for granted in the United States, and how there are many people in the world who struggle just to have clean water. Though there are many experiences I would love to share with you, I will limit the stories to only a few.



Imagine that you are nine months pregnant and homeless; and right next to your makeshift shelter is a giant pile of garbage. The stench of rotting trash is so strong that you can barely take a breath. You sleep on boxes pushed together to form a bed, and you hang sheets over the boxes to offer some privacy from the people passing by. Your husband works, but he only gets paid a meager wage; and renting a room is too expensive, so you make do with what you have. This is the reality for one couple in Cambodia. I met this couple while we were completing HIV and tuberculosis (TB) home visits through the hospital we were working with. It amazed me to see how optimistic this little family was in spite of their situation. After providing them with food and toiletries and talking with them about their newborn son who would soon be joining them, we asked if we could pray with them, which they gratefully accepted. We prayed for God to keep this young family safe, to give this mother and baby a healthy delivery, and to help them find a safe place to live. Afterwards, we saw many other patients impacted with HIV/TB and having the opportunity to go on these visits was a wonderful experience for me. The patients were not only grateful to receive a few food items, toiletries and prayers, but also very willing to open their homes to us and share their stories. Each family we visited was suffering from either poor health and/or lack of money for food or shelter, yet these families still remained optimistic and appreciative of what little they have. It made me remember how important it is to be content in every circumstance, whether in poverty or prosperity as stated in Philippians 4:12-13.

We also had the opportunity to work with – and educate – pharmacists at the Sihanouk Hospital Center of Hope on proper counseling techniques and medication safety. Shadowing the pharmacists was a

great way to learn the dynamics of their pharmacy; and to my surprise it is quite similar to how we process prescriptions in the United States, with a little less technology. One experience I had while shadowing a pharmacist made me realize how far this profession has come in the United States. A teenage girl was prescribed an anti-parasitic medication for vaginal discharge and the pharmacist asked if I knew any other indications for the medication. I told her it is typically only used for parasites and I suggested that she call the doctor to verify the medication and ensure it was not a mix up. The pharmacist then called the physician, who stated that the patient did not have any parasite; yet he was unwilling to change the medication. I asked the pharmacist if doctors ever ask for – or accept recommendations from – pharmacists for patient care. I was surprised to learn that most Cambodian doctors are unaware of how much knowledge a Cambodian pharmacist has, despite their advanced level of education. My hope is that as our team continues to serve in Cambodia, we can introduce interdisciplinary care at the hospital to increase the quality of care and decrease costs.

While at the hospital, we were also able to provide pharmacists with proper counseling techniques, including effective ways to explain medications to illiterate patients and how to avoid medication errors. It was encouraging to see that the pharmacists were eager to learn and willing to participate in the hands-on activities we planned – which included counseling one another on prescriptions using the “three prime questions” method and the “teach back” method. One of the main concerns that virtually every hospital pharmacist had involved medication safety and the best ways to avoid medication errors. We introduced them to the Institute for Safe Medication Practices Do Not Crush List,⁶ which they downloaded to every computer in every pharmacy. We also introduced them to drug databases for general medication information and for drug-drug interactions. The pharmacists were so welcoming and friendly, and I was sad that we were only able to spend two short days with them. We hope to begin fundraising to purchase annual subscriptions for a drug database (such as Micromedex Solutions⁷) for this hospital.

When it was time to return home, I was very eager to board the plane but I was also torn because I had such an amazing time in Cambodia. The Cambodian people asked me when I plan to return, and I told them I would come back every year if I could. It was a tremendous blessing to be able to help the Cambodians, especially the children in the villages. Many of the children knew who Jesus was and would pray with us. I was so grateful to be able to share the love of Jesus with the children by playing with and loving on them and I was so happy to see their faces light up when I gave them a simple “Jesus Loves You” bracelet. When we gave them the bracelets, we would ask them if they knew about Jesus. After they told us what they knew of Him, we would then tell them about Jesus and pray with them if they wanted. I thank God for giving me this opportunity and I pray He will arrange for me to return to Cambodia on another medical mission trip in the next few years. Please keep the people of Cambodia in your prayers, especially the hospital employees and patients, and the young homeless family.

The Elderly of Cambodia

KaoShoua Lee

My trip to Cambodia was such a blessing and it really gave me a different perspective on life. Being in Cambodia and working with so many different people reinforced what I would like to do in the future in terms of my own career path. I saw many things in Cambodia that

I never thought I would ever get to see or experience. The things I saw were sad and heartbreaking, and they made me appreciate all the little things I have in life. However, there were also things I saw that made my heart jump for joy. There are two stories in particular that I would like to share, and I hope they will touch your heart as they did mine.

First, allow me to briefly explain the background of the pharmacies in Cambodia. There are many pharmacies all over the country, especially in the bigger cities. Unlike the US, medications in Cambodia are not regulated by the government. Pharmacies are not run by trained pharmacists and most medications can be purchased without a prescription. Most people will go to a pharmacy and explain their symptoms and then they are given random medications to help treat their symptoms. Often these medications are inappropriately used to treat the patient’s symptoms, and they are never provided with instructions or warnings about potential side effects.

This leads me to my first story. We were on our second clinic day in Poipet. We went to a very poor village where resources were limited. An elderly woman came to see us complaining of very bad diarrhea. She explained that she had gone to a local pharmacy the day before and was given several different medications. We asked to see the medications, which were: loperamide, tetracycline, amoxicillin, and paracetamol. She stated that the pharmacy owner instructed her to take all of the medications once a day for the next few days. Working alongside our nurse practitioners, we instructed the woman to stop taking the antibiotics since they were unnecessary and they could exacerbate her diarrhea. We counseled her on the other two medications, educating her on their use, their dosage, and their potential side effects. We then prayed for her health and her family. After we sent her on her way, I couldn’t stop thinking about her and the rest of the Khmer people. Many of them were too poor to see a doctor, or they lived too far away from a hospital. They often rely on the pharmacy owners to help them; but since these owners are not properly trained to dispense medications, it could lead to a decline in health instead.

The second story took place on our last clinic day in Poipet when another elderly woman came to the clinic. She went through triage, saw the nurse practitioner, and finally came through the pharmacy to get her medications. She left, then returned 20 minutes later with all of her medications from home. She wanted to speak to the pharmacy students about them. After going through each medication, I discovered that she was taking multiple nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs, random antibiotics, and multiple different types of vitamins – and she had no understanding as to why she was taking any of them. I spent about 30 minutes explaining the purpose of each medication and instructing her on which ones to continue and which ones to stop taking. I also explained the proper dosages and potential side effects. As I counseled this woman, I couldn’t help but think of her as my own grandma. I had worked very closely with the elderly Hmong population back in my hometown; and in my experience I had noticed that language barriers and cultural differences made it difficult for them to understand the use of their medications. Therefore, it is my duty as a future Hmong pharmacist to explain their medications in a way that will ensure they will be taken correctly. The Khmer grandma was so thankful for our help and she left with a better understanding of her medications. We were able to pray with her as well. We truly hope she felt the love of Christ during her visit with our team. Having the opportunity to perform a medication therapy review for her was a blessing and a reminder of why I wanted to go to pharmacy school in the first place, and it reinforced the values that I will carry throughout my pharmacy career.

The Women of Cambodia

Jade Williams

Beautiful, strong, and hopeful are the women of Cambodia. They are willing to do anything to provide for their families and support their friends; therefore, it was an honor to serve them. The stories of the following women really touched me and gave me a renewed outlook on life.

After a long day of seeing mostly children at a clinic in Phnom Pehn, I heard commotion at the nurse practitioner's station. There was a woman in her early forties sobbing uncontrollably. As I walked over to see what was wrong, I was told she needed prayer. One of the nurse practitioners had felt a cyst in her breast. The woman did not know when she would be able to see a doctor or if she could even afford it. I prayed over her for healing, faith, miracles and blessings. Afterwards, her tears melted away and she was actually able to be seen at a hospital that same day! (This is unheard of in Cambodia!) Being able to pray with her and then seeing her courage despite her situation reminded me of the confidence I have in Christ and His ability to make a way in alignment with His will.



Throughout our clinics in Poipet, we worked with a translator named Leakhena. She played a very important role in helping us educate the patients about their medications. She went out of her way to write the directions for the medication on the labels. When we were counseling using the “teach back” method, she helped ensure that the patients understood how to take their medication. We spent three days of our clinics with Leakhena. She never complained or became frustrated in the hot weather. Her spirit constantly exuded humility and kindness. It was obvious that she truly had a love for her people and was so thankful that we came to serve them. Seeing her compassion and patience with each patient reminded me of why I chose pharmacy as my career: to serve people wholeheartedly with the love of Christ. “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” (1 Peter 4:10, NIV)

During the trip, I also participated in a clinic for women who were former prostitutes. These women were part of an organization that mentored them, provided them with resources, and helped them develop skills so that they would not return to prostitution as a means to provide for their families. Some of the girls were as young as fifteen years old and had experienced all kinds of abuse. Despite their circumstances, they remained hopeful for a new life and a new beginning. During our time with them, we were able to provide them with necessary medications, as well as lotions and other products. I was amazed at their courage and I was thankful for the opportunity to serve them and hear their stories.

Finally, we were also invited to teach the pharmacists at the hospital (mostly women), which was so exciting because they were brilliant and eager to learn. They continually asked questions about recommending

medications to doctors, medication safety, and how to properly counsel patients. We took pictures, had lunch, and even danced at one of the parties hosted by the hospital. Being with them made me more aware of God’s faithfulness and love for women. He uses our unique gifts as women in pharmacy to serve and care for people across the nations. My life was truly impacted by the wonderful women I met on my trip to Cambodia. Their joyful spirits and the life lessons they taught me will always hold a special place in my heart.

The Children of Cambodia

Laken Wilson

Before going on this trip, I never imagined the degree of hopelessness and poverty I would encounter in Cambodia. I could talk about this trip for hours, but I really want to tell you about the Cambodian children. Children in Cambodia mature much faster than children in the US. They learn to become very independent at a young age because they have responsibilities that must be met and chores that must be completed for their family’s survival. Parents work all day in the fields or at small roadside vending booths just to try to make a dollar; therefore children often care for their younger siblings at home, help plant and pick vegetables, gather wood for fires, and help in the rice fields. I adored the children! Their smiles could light up a world of darkness. Their hearts are so pure and true. They were so happy when we simply picked them up and played with them because they long for our attention and affection. They are very smart, clever, and loving. Although they have very few toys, clothes, or food, they are some of the happiest kids I have ever been around in my life. They all play so well together, and they were beyond grateful when we gave them a small bracelet, toothpaste, toothbrush, or bubbles to play with. We sang songs such as Jesus Loves Me and Jesus Loves the Little Children had hard return in English and Khmer (the official language in Cambodia).

One of the patients who touched me most was a little 2-year-old boy who came to one of our clinics. He was like many of the children in Cambodia: he had scabies all over his body and he was severely dehydrated. When I picked him up to make sure he took his medication, he immediately wrapped his arms around my shoulder. My heart melted and I just sat there rocking him and rubbing his back and head. He stayed with me for almost the remainder of the clinic. A woman from the village told me that the boy’s father had died and his mother had gone to Thailand to find work; she only came back to Cambodia once a month. She explained that many different people in the village try to help care for him, but they simply don’t have enough money or food to feed their own families... so he often has to go without. They had placed a small piece of wax at the end of his hair on top of his head to show that he was an orphan child in the village. I held him even tighter and prayed for God to wrap His arms around him, to keep him safe and healthy and that one day when he reached the age of accountability, he would come to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9, KJV) “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” (Romans 10:9-10, KJV)

I also had the privilege to meet a Christian Filipina by the name of Jen. She is a missionary who was led by God to set up multiple

schools in rural villages in Cambodia. She traveled to different villages and begged parents to let their children attend her school to get an education. This is a huge issue in Cambodia: many children do not have the opportunity for an education because they live in rural villages where there is no school nearby and no transportation to get there. Even those who are able to go to school must walk for miles on their own. Cambodian children love school and they consider learning to be a privilege and an honor. They value education so highly compared to most Americans. This really challenged me because I am guilty of complaining about how I dread school and cannot wait to be completely finished. As Americans, I feel that many of us have lost the appreciation and respect for being able to get a quality education. The best part about Jen was that she not only offers them an education, but she also uses these opportunities to teach the children about Jesus. She shared with me that she started out with nothing, but she prayed boldly and confidently for the Lord to provide for her and the children. It is amazing to see what can happen when the Lord is involved! She now has a few school books, some markers, and someone to build desks for the children. She shared one of her biggest concerns: as the children get older (around 12 or 13 years), parents realize their children are of “high value” because they have an education and can speak fluent English. As a result, their parents send them to Thailand so they may find an honorable job to be able to make money and provide for their families, but often instead, they are trafficked for sex to make money for their families. For some children, this is their only means of survival. She was very concerned that their new education could actually be making this problem worse, so now she is trying to create paid teaching assistant jobs for her students in Cambodia so they won't have to go to Thailand to find work. Jen is a woman of great Christian faith and strong determination... and she displays this daily by dedicating her life to do what God has led her to do.

Finally, one of the things that I enjoyed most about our trip was having the opportunity to pray with the patients individually after they had completed their wellness visits with us. Christianity is growing and becoming much more accepted in Cambodia, but many people still do not believe in Jesus Christ. I was able to share with multiple people what Jesus has done in my life and what He can do in their lives. Many of the locals talked about miracles they have experienced, which is how they came to know that God is real. They talked about how He has changed their lives and given them hope, and they have faith that He will provide for their needs. Their testimonies were such a blessing to me. I have heard this saying before, but it finally became real to me: you will find out just how “big” your faith is when you have nothing else, and your only option is to pray for your next meal. I ask you to please keep these sweet children and Jen in your thoughts and prayers.

Overall, we each have learned so much through this experience. God has shown us how wonderful and faithful He is, despite the circumstances we or others may be facing. He is always in control and we saw that truth every day during our time in Cambodia. God has plans for each of us – to give us “hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV) –and for that we are grateful. We ask you to pray for the people of Cambodia, especially the healthcare workers, the sick, and the lost; and please pray that God will continue to send Christian medical mission teams to meet their physical and spiritual needs.

References:

1. *East and Southeast Asia: Cambodia*. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world->

[factbook/geos/cb.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html). Updated July 24, 2017. Accessed July 30, 2017.
 2. Ung L. *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. New York, New York: Harper Collins Publisher. 2001.
 3. Joffe R. *The Killing Fields* [DVD]. United Kingdom: Warner Bros. 1984.
 4. Freedom's Promise Organization. <https://www.freedomspromise.org/>
 5. Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE. <http://sihosp.org/>
 6. Oral dosage forms that should not be crushed 2016. Institute for Safe Medication Practices. <http://www.ismp.org/tools/DoNotCrush.pdf>. Published 2016. Accessed July 23, 2017.
 7. DRUGDEX® System [database online]. Greenwood Village, CO: Truven Health Analytics. Available at: <http://www.micromedexsolutions.com/>. Updated March 25, 2009. Accessed July 23, 2017.

Laken Wilson is in her fourth-year of pursuing a Pharm D degree at Belmont University. She received a Bio-Chemistry degree from Middle Tennessee State University and graduated from Jackson County High School in Tennessee. She has been a member of CPFI for three consecutive years and was the 2016-2017 president for the CPFI organization at Belmont University. She was the former Fellowship of Christian Athletes president at MTSU from 2012-2014 and at Jackson County High School from 2008-2010. She is an active member of APhA and ASP. She is also a former member of the MTSU Lady Blue Raider Women's Basketball Team (2010-2014). She plans to graduate in May and pursue a lifelong career as a pharmacist. She currently resides in Murfreesboro, TN with her husband Matt Wilson.

Jade Williams is a fourth-year pharmacy student at Belmont University College of Pharmacy. She is originally from Nashville, TN and continues to live there with her husband, Marcus Williams, and dog, Dash. Jade enjoys watching movies, spending time with her family, and volunteering in her community. In the future, she hopes to continue to serve others with the love of Christ through community pharmacy and mission trips.

Lauren Howey is a fourth-year student pharmacist at Belmont University College of Pharmacy. She is originally from Newton, New Jersey where she lived for seventeen years before moving to Sunbright, Tennessee. She attended Roane State Community College to complete her prerequisites for pharmacy school. She has been an active member of APhA, ASHP, SNPhA, and CPFI for the past three years, and was the previous CPFI community service and social chair for the 2016-2017 school year. She currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee with her dog Alice, and two cats Nolan and Sassy. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with family, enjoying the outdoors, and volunteering in her community. Upon graduation in May she hopes to work with the underserved populations and continue her work through mission trips.

KaoShoua Lee is a fourth-year pharmacy student at Belmont University College of Pharmacy. She was born and raised in Saint Paul, Minnesota and is the only one of ten children to attend graduate school. KaoShoua graduated from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities with a Bachelor of Arts Degree back in 2012. KaoShoua has worked closely with her community back home and in Nashville during various volunteering events. She is involved in several student organizations including Student National Pharmaceutical Association (SNPhA), American Pharmacists Association (APhA), and Kappa Psi. KaoShoua currently resides in Nashville, TN but is planning to move back to her hometown to help her community.

Tracy R. Frame, Pharm.D, is an Assistant Professor of Pharmacy Practice at Belmont University College of Pharmacy. She completed her PharmD at Samford University in Birmingham, AL and her residency at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System in Denver, CO. She currently has a practice site in an addiction treatment center for women in Nashville, TN. She has traveled to Cambodia and Haiti and plans on continuing to offer the advanced practice experience in Cambodia every year for students.