Salena Ringenbach

Himalayan Health Journal Entries:

**May 7, 2019 (Day 1)**

Today I saw a sign on a tree which read, “Above all to not lose your desire to walk every day. I walk myself into a state of well being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts and I know no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it… But by sitting still, and the more one sits still, the closer one comes to feeling ill… if one just keeps on walking, everything will be alright.” I am finding that walking is a very central aspect of life and health in this mountainous region. There is basically only one road which scales the mountain so people walk to most destinations, and in addition, they walk or hike for pleasure. This active lifestyle is necessary, practical, and beneficial for the people of the region. This quote also illustrates a very simple sort of logic and understanding which influences the way in which they view their physical and mental well-being and stamina. In an almost metaphorical way, they believe that as long as you keep moving, everything will be okay, and I think that is a very beautiful and healthy way to view life and the necessity of an active lifestyle. This quote also recognizes the benefits of walking not only for physical health, but also mental health which is an important consideration.

**May 8, 2019 (Day 2)**

Today we went into the town of Mussoorie for the first time. It was much larger than I expected, and there were so many stores and people. Since we left from the CC, we walked into town in the area where more of the locals live and shop and walked towards the more touristy end. As we walked through, the shops seemed to get larger and more credible, the streets got a little cleaner, and there was more foot traffic. The denser population and the prevalence of street animals made me think about sanitation in the area. We have talked a lot about water here since we have to be very careful about checking the sources if we do not want to contract some bacteria and get sick. When in town, we have to check to make sure that the places we want to eat are safe before we order food. Most of the food itself is fine, but we have to know what kind of water they use when cleaning the dishes and food. In terms of waste, we talked for a little bit one day about the relatively large percentage of the Indian population which still defecates outside. Not only must there be a problem with human waste, but I have also seen cows, pigs, dogs, monkeys, and many other animals on the streets which could cause contamination. This made me wonder how often the local residents get sick or if they have built up some kind of resistance or other ways to keep themselves healthy in the presence of so many potential contaminants of food and water.

**May 9, 2019 (Day 3)**

Today we drove to the trail head of Nag Tibba for our trek. It was about a 3 hour drive on a super curvy, narrow, dangerous road. The roads in the Himalayas have some benefits and some negative consequences on the environment and community. These roads allow easier transport of materials up and down the mountains so that the mountain villages are not completely isolated. However, the Himalayas are the world’s youngest mountain range and the geography is still unsettled. That means that there are high levels of seismic activity in the region so there are frequent landslides and rocks falling which can potentially injure travelers or cut off routes. Particularly near the borders, road construction is a highly political move as the Indian government wants to keep pace in terms of trade with the surrounding countries so they essentially disregard the major environmental consequences. Another curious aspect of the roads is the lack of driving regulation and set traffic patterns. The driving seems rather reckless as cars, buses, and motorcycles zip around curves which often overlook steep cliffs, but it is not completely erratic, and motor vehicle accidents are not that much more prevalent than in other countries. Beeping is used as an effective way to warn other drivers of your presence coming around a curve and to communicate other maneuvers on the road. Also, without set lanes and traffic patterns, vehicles can only go so fast so quick reflexes and braking prevent many accidents. Overall, to someone used to a highly regulated road system such as we have in the United States, the driving culture in India can be unnerving at first due to both the unsettled geography and sporadic driving.

**May 10, 2019 (Day 4)**

Today was the second day of our trek and after a relatively short hike up the mountain, we set up camp in a clearing near the temple. I find the connection between nature and religion, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism in this area, to be so fascinating. Akshay talked to us a little bit more about the history and significance of this particular temple. It is dedicated to the snake god which falls underneath the larger deity Shiva who is usually depicted with a serpent. The temple used to be constructed solely from the wood found in the surrounding forest. Usually the priest would take on the responsibility of protecting the temple and the surrounding forest. Therefore, principles of conservation and preservation were quite literally practiced religiously. However, as transportation up and around the mountains has been made easier, the people who take care of the temple have also created a larger cement and colorful structure around it. In addition, this has attracted many more pilgrims to the area who come to worship at the temple through a form of religious tourism. This can be problematic since many visitors are not familiar with the concept of leave-no-trace or conservation so in large numbers, they can create significant damage in the forests surrounding the temple. It is very interesting to me that the presence of the temple used to mean enhanced protection of the environment, but now its presence and the crowds it attracts may be causing harm without necessarily being aware of their impact.

**May 11, 2019 (Day 5)**

Harvesting

**May 12, 2019 (Day 6)**

Today we had lunch with the Chancellor and the rest of the delegation from Pitt, and later in the evening, several of us went to another meeting with them at the Hanifl Center. After a general overview presentation from Dr. Alter about the Pitt Study Abroad programs which run in the Himalayas and our partnership with the Hanifl Center, we arranged our chairs in a circle for a discussion directly between the delegation and the students. At first the conversation was mostly centered on the Business and Leadership program, but we also had a chance to reflect on our experience thus far and give feedback. This discussion gave me a new level of appreciation for the amazing opportunity we have here and how it is impacting my life already. I began to reflect on the knowledge and skills which I am gaining outside of class which may not seem to be directly related to healthcare but are critically important, including leadership. Particularly in a field centered on caring for others, leadership must be empathetic and understanding. Memorizing diagnostic symptoms and treatments is not enough to make someone a good healthcare professional. The patient needs to feel respected and genuinely cared for, and I am certainly learning this leadership style and level of care from the example of all of the people at Hanifl and Woodstock who look after us. Every morning Akshay’s first order of business is to make sure that we are all feeling well and to check in with anyone who had any kind of issue the previous day. Also, while we were on the trek, I learned important lessons about how to think of others’ needs and how to work towards common goals from a whole spectrum of starting points. Each of these lessons, some more subtle than others, will certainly help me in the future to be the most confident, empathetic, and caring physician I can be to any patient who comes to me.

**May 13, 2019 – Rest Day**

**May 14, 2019 (Day 7)**

Today we were back in the classroom for the first time in a while. A lot of what we have talked about thus far has seemed to me to be more related to the environment and ecosystems rather than healthcare and medicine. While I found all of this information interesting and important to know while visiting here, I kept waiting in anticipation to really get into the other topics. Then today while listening to Stephen Alter’s lecture and watching the documentary, I had a bit of an epiphany moment where I realized that we actually have been learning about health this whole time because in this region the environment is so intimately linked to health. Health encompasses so much more than just doctors, hospitals, diagnoses, and treatments. It includes every aspect of life, and life in this region is so shaped by the terrain and wildlife. Especially in the smaller, more remote villages, many families are “hand to mouth” so their own survival is dependent on the survival of their crops which is dependent on the weather, pests in the wild, and natural disasters. Also, the distance between these villages and necessary resources affects the health of the community because of limited access. The people have such a strong dependence on the nature around them that it fosters a necessary relationship of mutual care.

**May 15, 2019 (Day 8)**

Today Dr. George Clarence came in to speak with us more specifically about Indian healthcare. He is trained as an orthopedic surgeon and now is the administrative head of Landour Community Hospital. One thing that I found particularly interesting today was that when asked his opinion of what is the most dire and urgent need within the Indian healthcare system, his response was “the heart.” Earlier he had shown us many statistics about the large number of vacant positions in healthcare facilities nationwide. Overall, about 30% of positions remain unfilled. For doctors, it is closer to 50%, and for nurses, it is only about 10% because the nursing positions are fairly coveted government jobs. However, Dr. George said that the vacancy rates are not because India has a lack of doctors or nurses or other healthcare professionals. Rather, it is because they lack the heart or motivation to go and work where there is the most need. Most doctors have their own families to look after as well so why would they want to settle down in a remote village which greatly needs access to medical care, but has no good schools for the doctor’s children or enough food and water access to adequately feed their family. This is a big reason for why poorer, remote villages of which there are many have difficulty accessing quality healthcare. There are several efforts to look after these villages without having a resident doctor at each facility. For example, there is the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) which operates the Reproductive Child Health (RCH) program. In this scheme, one ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), under the supervision of an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM), is assigned to 200 rural families to monitor both pre- and post-natal care. Basically, they go around visiting villages to check in on pregnant women and newborns, and this program has been very successful. Another way villages get semi-regular healthcare is by having doctors and nurses from surrounding hospitals set up a day-long clinic about once a month.

**May 16, 2019 (Day 9)**

Today Dr. Alter came in to speak with us about alternative medical practices in India. It was very interesting to learn about the origin and theory of these practices which make them rational within a particular cultural framework. Being so accustomed to biomedicine and the objective values of Western science, I find it difficult sometimes to wrap my head around the amount of faith people have in these other forms of treatment, and I find that my first question is always about how they judge the efficacy. With many of these practices, the interpretation of efficacy is entirely different than the cause and effect type relationship which we expect from biomedicine. For example, in Ayurveda, no one is ever completely healthy so effective treatments are ones which cause a shift to a more balanced state, but are not necessarily expected to cure someone entirely. In other types, the effect may simply be that people feel better or that the healing practice has religious significance to them. This really got me thinking about the social and cultural aspects of health and illness which play a major role in medicine. I also began thinking about the power of the brain and the impact our own perceptions can have on our own reality. Although there may be no scientific backing like we see in western biomedicine, could a patient’s strong belief that by pursuing Ayurveda, yoga, Unani, or Nature Cure, they are receiving effective treatment and becoming healthier actually improve their conditions by first relieving any emotional or spiritual qualms?

**May 17, 2019 (Day 10)**

Today Dr. Chopra came to talk to us about Indian rivers, dams, and development. The rivers in India are of great significance in most aspects of life, including health, industry, and culture. In particular, the River Ganga is believed to have descended from the heavens, and the water has the power to wash away sins. While the sacred purity is still celebrated, the river itself is quite polluted by industrial waste, sewage, filth from bathers, and the remains of dead bodies. This pollution combined with the effects of climate change is severely threatening the viability of the river. When talking about water management today, Dr. Chopra discussed the traditional belief in Kashyapa’s Principles which focus on the sacred value of the river, its symbiotic relationship with the surrounding forests, and the responsibility of every individual to practice conservation. However, he said that a major problem is that nowadays the rivers are managed by engineers who “do not see the river, they only see the water.” He also said that engineers are taught that any water flowing to the sea is wasted. However, this is a harmful ideology as it does not treat the river as a vibrant ecosystem filled with much more than just water and surrounded by life on every side. The condition of the river is a very critical problem which needs to be addressed. If the River Ganga were to dry up, not only would it cause a drastic water shortage for the people and agriculture, but also an entire religious belief system and centuries of mythology would be thrown into question.