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Howdy all!

So, I thought I'd send out this out to let you know what sorts of things I've seen and done here in Thailand so far... I've been here for about 2 and a half weeks, and I've got about 2 and a half weeks to go. For some of you, this represents the first communication you may have heard from me in a couple of years, so I hope this email finds you well! For others, some of the stuff in here will be redundant... sorry about that.

Before I start, let me mention a few things, just so everyone is caught up... on March 17, I found out that I'd be going to UCLA for residency in both Internal Medicine and Pediatrics... and at the same time, I found out that I was going to be marrying Justine Walker, a fellow med student who is going to UCLA also, in Pediatrics. She and I had been dating for about 8 months, though we'd been friends for quite a bit longer than that. We start on June 15 (I'm driving a truck out at the end of May), and we'll probably get married next year, tentative date is June 17, 2006, probably in Chicago.

I arrived in Thailand on March 21, landing in Bangkok. I then flew to Khon Kaen, which is in Northeast Thailand, and was from there escorted to my placement at a rural community hospital in Chiang Yuen district, in the province of Mahasarakham. This area is a good 400 km/250 miles from Bangkok, so we didn't feel any of the earthquake that struck Indonesia. It's also culturally and physically close to Laos, and in fact, the language spoken by the rural folks here is basically the Lao language, which is similar to Thai, but which represents another barrier for me. Oh well, I'm picking up Lao, in addition to brushing up on my Thai. This particular placement is about 350 km/225 miles from my previous placement in Phitsanulok province, and the area is much hotter (the high temperature is usually around 100 every day, the low is around 80) and generally poorer. The hospital itself is a bit bigger, however, although they don't have near the herbal medicine/massage facilities that my former hospital placement had. And once again, nobody really speaks any fluent English.

It's been 5 years since I was here before, and mobile phones are more prevalent than ever. I picked up the cheapest one I could find for about 55 bucks, with a phone number. It's pay as you go, and I can actually receive phone calls (doesn't cost me anything), as well as place international ones

for reasonably inexpensively. If you feel inclined to call, Thailand's country code is 66, and my number is 07-014-7110. Kids in Thailand change their phone numbers all the time. It's very easy to do... in fact, they go out in search of "neat" numbers, ie ones that have symmetry, or easy arrangements of 1 or 2 numbers... and when they tire of that number, they just get another. It's bizarre. I'll be keeping this number, just so you know. You can also email, but it may take a day or two for me to get back to you.

I'm staying at the hospital, and I mostly hang out with one of the two young doctors who work here (one of whom happens to like 80's/90's American heavy metal/hard rock, so we talk about that a bunch. Imagine trying to explain what "All the girlies say I'm pretty fly for a white guy" or "Smells Like Teen Spirit" means. I'm not sure I even know). They alternate their time between outpatient clinics/ER (around 80 patients/day) and inpatients (40 bed hospital, usually 80-100% full). Otherwise, I hang out in the herbal medicine/massage area and learn what I can. I'll just mention some high points of my time here so far:

1) by far, the craziest thing I've ever seen: going into the operating room to remove an appendix. I've seen plenty of appendectomies in the USA, and most of them are done laparoscopically, of course under general anesthesia, ie, you're knocked out and asleep. But not in Thailand. This one was done open, so the surgeon (a 29 year old, who'd been out of med school for a couple of years) made an incision in the right lower quadrant of the abdomen... and the PATIENT WAS STILL AWAKE. The patient was getting some Valium and ketamine, but was most definitely talking. Then, in his drug-induced haze, he found out that there was an American in the OR, and decided to spout George Bush's praises. I just kept my mouth shut... no need to create an international incident with a drugged out patient in the operating room. ¶ But machismo is machismo, all the world around, and that's what this patient likes in Bush.

2) I also saw a cesarean section, which, thankfully, was done under spinal anesthesia, and was almost identical to everything we did in the states, although the OB did his own anesthesia. The miracle of birth and life will never cease to amaze me.

3) I've seen LOTS of tuberculosis patients. They have a whole room set aside where TB patients can come for their meds. I have no idea how many there are in the community, but I'd estimate hundreds. They receive the same antibiotic regimens we do in the USA, and those regimens typically last at least 9 months. Some of these patients have TB in other organs beyond their lungs. Bad stuff.

4) I've also seen a good number of AIDS patients (don't get me started on where it comes from... the sex industry is a complicated issue). As far as other unusual diseases, there's lots of dogbites (gotta go get rabies shots because as many as 10% of the stray dogs here are rabid, and there's a whole bunch of stray dogs), lots of motorcycle accidents (yes mom, I promise I will always wear my helmet), dengue fever, polio (not an active case,

probably post-polio syndrome as opposed to active poliomyelitis, but still pretty rare in the USA), plus lots of bizarre cancerous growths that old people deny exist and because they don't see regular health care providers, nobody evaluates.

5) I was a foot massage machine one morning. On Tuesdays, it's diabetes/hypertension clinic day at the hospital, and we try to have as many of those patients as possible come to the massage clinic so they can get reflexology lower leg and foot massages. This helps improve peripheral circulation and possibly prevent peripheral nerve disease or blood vessel disease that leads to gangrenous feet and awful problems in diabetics. Plus it feels darn good. There were 8 stations set up, with patients at all of them, and 3 masseuses... so, I jumped in and did my part, providing massage therapy to 4 or 5 patients. One old woman liked it so much, she had me massage her arms and hands. It hurt my hands, but it felt good to be providing a valuable service as a traditional medicine practitioner to these patients. Finally, an alternative medicine modality that I might be able to incorporate into my own practice or even research.

6) A trip to the snake village. At this particular village, they raise cobras and vipers for show, and as a source of generating the anti-venin to their toxins. So they put on quite a demonstration. At one point, a girl put a poisonous snake's head in her MOUTH. There was lots of taunting these huge king cobras and pit vipers, and at a couple of points, the snakes actually escaped off the stage and started coming towards us, which was REALLY scary.

Other interesting times have included going to a funeral, attending Easter services at an English language Episcopalian church in Bangkok, meeting a British medical student and commiserating about the abysmal state of health care and comparing notes about our training and the practice of medicine, and finally, NEVER setting my alarm clock, but rather going to bed when the sun goes down, and getting up when it comes up. And of course, the eating. The northeastern Thais are notorious for eating food that seems gross at best, and may represent a public health hazard at worst. I've eaten fire ants, as well as their eggs... I've eaten beef tongue... I've eaten salad made with a special kind of fish sauce which has basically been allowed to sit out on the front porch in the hot sun for a few weeks until it grows a nice funky microbiological culture, and then is used as the dressing... I've avoided eating the beef salad made from raw ground beef that's well-seasoned, and I've avoided eating the boiled, congealed blood that they often serve in noodle soups... but of course, I've had lots of the most wonderful food in the world, and it's all so cheap and common here. It's culinary heaven. I could NEVER finish all the fruit in my fridge right now.

I fly back to the USA on April 26. The Cap Gun Cowboys are playing a whole bunch in April and May, as we prepare to take a break (but not break up, oh no) as I move away. We're releasing a NEW ALBUM at a CD release party on

May 21. Mark your calendars, and if you can get to Cleveland that night, you will NOT be sorry. The album sounds much better than our first album. We're also playing Chicago on May 7, for you middle America types. Check the website at [www.capguncowboys.com](http://www.capguncowboys.com). I'm moving out in late May, so I may stop and visit some of you on my way out west. I'm also hoping to try and get out to the east coast for a couple of days before that happens, so with luck, I can see a few of you then, too. I'll try and write another email towards the end of my time here, summing up my experience. I hope you've enjoyed this one. Please write or call, I love to hear from people!

Love-  
Phil

PS: everyone should read "Betrayal of Trust: the Collapse of Global Public Health" by Laurie Garrett. I personally get bored by public health discussions, but this book is an amazing call-to-arms that has changed my life. I'm not done with it yet, but I'm close. It is fascinating.

As promised, here's the second and final segment of my recent experience in Thailand! I write this letter while sitting on a plane bound for Chicago from Narita (Tokyo). In case anyone is curious about how long the flight takes, I boarded in Bangkok and flew to Tokyo (6 hours), waited in the Tokyo airport for a couple of hours, fly from Tokyo to Chicago (13 hours), wait in O'hare and clear customs, and finally, fly an additional hour from Chicago to Cleveland. All told, my journey will take approximately 26 hours, of which 20 hours are spent actually on the airplane, in motion.

I am incredibly sad to be leaving Thailand, since I have no idea when I will be returning, and being there again has reaffirmed my love for the country, the culture, the people, the language, Buddhism and the lessons it offers, the traditional medicine techniques, the food... I will happily recommend Thailand to anyone interested, and am more than happy to talk about it, ad infinitum and ad nauseum. It is perhaps the most traveler-friendly, non-English-speaking destination I've ever been to, especially in Asia. However, fortunately, I will be moving to LA, which is often thought as the 77th Thai province (the first 76 residing within Thailand itself), and with anywhere between 100,000 and 300,000 Thai people, depending on your source.

The most important experience to relate to you surrounds the Thai new year festival, Songkrah, which I had the good fortune to be a part of while I was here in Thailand. Songkrah festival is a huge water party which involves paying respect to elders and monks in the community and workplace, in exchange for blessings and good luck wishes for the upcoming year. It takes place during the heart of the hottest season of the year, between March and May, prior to the beginning of the rainy (but still hot!) season, from June to October. The act of paying respect variously involves putting water on the shoulders and heads of elders or on Buddhist statues in temples; it may also involve the family actually bathing the eldest member of the family, followed by that family member blessing the family; it may involve putting water or scented, powdery white paste on the faces of seniority in the workplace. However, beyond all of this, it is also an opportunity for families to come together once a year, akin to how we gather as families at Christmas time. All businesses close, and traffic in Bangkok actually becomes quite tolerable as people empty out of the city into their provincial family centers. The most notable and notorious part of Songkrah, however, is that it really amounts to an enormous water fight. People walk around with all manner of super-soakers, water guns, buckets of water, scoops, home-made water cannons, and hoses. There is nowhere that anyone can go during this time where they won't expect to be drenched. I wonder what the casualty rates are for cell phones, wallets, and passports, but I imagine they are ridiculously high; I know I kept mine bagged up tight in plastic, or just left them at home. In essence, people stand by the side of the road, and shower passersby with water, especially if they happen to

be on a motorcycle (which I often was) or in a bus with the windows open (got nailed there too). You may find a person with a pickup truck and unfathomable numbers of Thais crowded in the back (I counted 20 in one truck bed) along with as much water in barrels, buckets, and garbage cans that they can bring... they then cruise the streets, showering water on anyone they see. The more cruel actually use water from dirty disgusting canals, or they put huge blocks of ice in it so it's frigid. But of course, because the temperature outside exceeds 102 or 103 degrees, the water inevitably feels pretty good. Anyhow the experience was amazing, and I had some of the most purely Thai cultural experiences I've had of my life, in terms of time spent making merit, watching Thai dramatic theatre, or conferring gifts on the elderly (defined as anyone over 60... remember, this is a culture where life expectancies are not as high as in Western societies, and anyways, they RESPECT the elderly), or just spending family time with my friends and their families. Not to mention being continuously soaking wet. If you ever have a chance to come to Thailand from April 12-16, you're in for a treat...

Other notable experiences:

- 1) walking in the Thai forest near a temple with two herbal medicine experts. I had no idea that so many trees and plants had medicinal benefits according to Thai traditional medicine. It's funny, we entered the temple grounds and spoke with a monk (who, by the way, was teaching a class of about 20 boys, essentially an orphanage) who said he didn't think there were too many herbal plants in that particular forest... little did he know!
- 2) Trying to shave my head, with my electric clippers, like I do every 2 or 3 weeks, finding it didn't work on Thai electricity, and having to find a barber at 7:30 in the morning so I wouldn't walk around with two shaved stripes on my head like a nuclear fallout victim
- 3) Teaching massage and relaxation to the community, and even getting to speak and demonstrate some techniques. Most of the Thai people we encounter have never interacted with a foreigner, much less one who can speak their language. It's a hoot.
- 4) Visiting my old placement in Phitsanulok province where I lived 5 years ago. The hospital has improved so much. They have expanded their traditional medicine program ENORMOUSLY, with huge production facilities and a massage school. It was also gratifying to see evidence of the mark I left on the hospital in the form of English language on all of the herbal medicines that the hospital produces.
- 5) Eating more bugs, cooked two different ways, for BREAKFAST. My stomach was not so ready for that. And became even less ready when the father of the household brought in a bag of them, alive and kicking. Yuck.
- 6) An 11 hour bus ride and a 14 hour train ride. I love driving, but there's nothing like being the passenger to reacquaint you with the world and the scenery and the community.
- 7) Caring for HIV patients. One woman had acquired the virus from her husband, who had since left her. She wasn't sure how he got it, and she wasn't sure where he was, and when we talked to her, she had just been told

of her infection. All she could do was sadly smile, and just break my heart. In another case, both the mother and her infant child had the virus.

At any given time, there was always an HIV patient being treated for fungal meningitis, which one would only get if their immune system was dysfunctional. Perhaps most strange, often tuberculosis patients would occupy beds within 3 feet of HIV patients, who are completely unable to fight off TB themselves and could catch it from their fellow patients. TB is a problem in a few major urban centers in the states, and in HIV patients, but in Thailand, it's a pretty common problem among both HIV-infected and "healthy" patients.

8) Running out of gas in my motorcycle on my way up a mountain, and coasting many miles down the mountain, followed by being pulled by a tuk-tuk (weird 3-wheeled motorized vehicle which has a 2 stroke engine and 2 gears and it makes a tuk-tuk sound) to a gas station.

Some interesting points to think about... I met some Thai medical students who had studied in either the USA or England and spoke good enough English to work in either country. However, they wanted to stay in Thailand, in spite of all the problems we in the Western culture might perceive (dirty water, public health problems, the heat, no modernization for all, etc). In essence, there are many aspects of Thai life that they (as well as I) would argue are BETTER than we have in the Western world. Sometimes, I think we are so wrapped in thinking that the USA is the best in every respect that we forget how much we have to learn from other, older, non-Judeo-Christian cultures. Perhaps related to that, what is American culture? I think that because the USA has been open to so many different cultures, it lacks a specific cultural identity, beyond the description of it as a country open to diversity. No tradition that you can think of is uniquely American or observed by all Americans, nor is it fair to say that America should adopt any particular tradition, although Christmas (in secular terms) may represent the closest thing we have. It's interesting to spend time in a country where 95%+ adopts a single religion. I am certainly not advocating that we adopt the Christian morality on which the country was founded... I think that would be a step backwards rather than a step forwards. Perhaps one could hold up Thailand as an example. Many aspects are better because of the singular nature of the religion, but I think many aspects are also worse, but that's a discussion for another time.

And finally, life in Thailand wouldn't be complete without Thai renditions of old American pop songs. I heard "Eternal Flame" by the Bangles, which, in the Thai accent became "Eternal Frame." The Thai taste in English language pop music is bizarre, at best. People love to sing "Love me, love my dog." Perhaps it's all the stray dogs (which are a "delicacy" in Northeast Thailand and which I never tried, as far as I know) roaming the country.

I hope you've enjoyed reading my ramblings... I hope to see many of you soon, and if I haven't heard from you recently (or even if I have!) please write or call!! 216-401-1627 should work for a while, and I will always have my hotmail account.

Love,  
Phil