Ho Chi Minh City
and Cho Ray Hospital

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for

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With thanks

to

Dr. Bob Jarrett and Hearts Around the World
for making the correct introductions and ensuring access

and to

Cho Ray Hospital’s faculty, staff and patients
for welcoming both me and my camera.

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Flying to Ho Chi Minh City in 2005 for my first visit to Cho Ray Hospital, my preconceived notions of what to expect sustained a high level of anxiety within me. Cho Ray serves as the major tertiary referral hospital for all of South Vietnam’s 40 million people. That’s quite a catchment area for any hospital in any nation, but Cho Ray has only 1400 beds with a daily census of approximately 3000 patients. It’s not difficult to do the math and realize that there are usually two patients in each bed and sometimes one patient lurking beneath the bed.

But really, what is most impressive about Cho Ray is not the volume of patients that receive care on a daily basis but the incredible spectrum of pathology. Visiting as a cardiologist, I have been exposed to an enormous range of disease processes that I would see only rarely if ever in the U.S. like uncorrected congenital heart disease in adults, rheumatic heart disease in teenagers and infective endocarditis at advanced stages.

However, Cho Ray is known throughout Vietnam as a beacon of light for quality care. Funded by the Vietnamese government and affiliated with Ho Chi Minh University Medical School, over 2500 medical students and 1000 post-graduate physicians receive their training at Cho Ray every year.

I am personally very proud to be a part of the effort to make that beacon shine even brighter through my work with Hearts Around the World and I highly recommend that everyone spends some time in Vietnam, enjoying the food, and getting to know the people and their culture. If you are in the medical profession, volunteer your skills at one of their hospitals. As physician volunteers or medical students/residents, the time spent at Cho Ray would leave a lifetime of educational memories and the realization that the time spent in Vietnam was a personal and professional transformational experience.

Robert M. Jarrett, MD, FACC
President Hearts Around the World, Inc.
Introduction

As the plane dipped low off the South China Sea and skimmed over the jagged hills and endless green, I thought, Good morning, Vietnam, and flashed back to Colonel Kurtz, Michael Herr and Tim O’Brien. For a moment, I wondered if TWA, despite the posh air-hub in Taipei, would be landing us on some grass strip; figured there'd probably be a jeep waiting there to roll me into town. But then, quite suddenly, a factory popped up under the plane, billowing steam, followed by another and another until, almost out of nowhere: there was Ho Chi Minh, and we landed on a runway indistinguishable from a hundred others around the world.

I told the taxi to take me to the Caravelle Hotel - famous from the 60’s as a watering hole for war correspondents while they waited for the US Command’s daily “follies” across the street in the Rex - and slumped back as we buzzed past shops and sumptuous gardens towards the heart of the business and shopping district in Quan 1. The Caravelle boasts five stars and, though I’m not sure who gave them, I’d say the claim is merited. Walking past carefully sculpted pot of flowers (bigger than me) in the lobby to meet a group of cardiologists from Hearts Around the World, I realized that I was woefully under-dressed for the crowd and started to wonder where the green hills had gone.

Dodging through traffic later that afternoon, I found them on a half-torn billboard. Another day, I could feel the presence of the jungle in a market full of fruits and greens and fish, packed between skyscrapers. Here was a conic straw hat and there a rickety bike: glimpses of the imagined, movie Vietnam that I’d seen on the flight in but mixed with Gucci and a swirl of motorbikes.

Throughout the week I was in there, I was drawn to these intersections of the rural, War-era stereotype of the country and the cosmopolitan reality of modern Saigon. To a tourist, the “modernity” might pop the bubble of an imagined authenticity, but as one of my professors, Deborah Gewertz, would be quick to point out, both are equally “authentic” to the extent that they exist (everything that happens in Vietnam is definitionally authentically Vietnamese). And so, I looked for moments when both realities appeared in a scene that was recognizably Vietnamese from the “tourist” perspective but also characteristic of the more metropolitan Ho Chi Minh that I was experiencing, hoping to temper orientalist visions with a more nuanced picture.

Before leaving home, I had talked with Dr. Jarrett, a cardiologist whose organization, Hearts Around the World, had been working in Cho Ray Hospital for years, and he told me to be ready to walk into a “sea of humanity.” He wasn’t wrong.

The swirling motorcycles in the streets might as well have driven into Cho Ray’s main courtyard for all the noise and congestion, and each floor I could see through the massive facade seemed equally packed. The hospital is Ho Chi Minh’s largest and is reputed to be one of the best despite the overcrowding when the census spikes over 3,000. Beds in many wards are double occupancy and stretchers fill the halls outside others. None of the inpatient units have enough nurses to provide full-board care and so patient’s family members wander in and out, comforting, cooking meals and sleeping on the floor. Like the green hills, the scene was as I had imagined it before I left.

But then I met the seasoned specialists, and walked into the ICU and cardiac surgery units. Coming off of six weeks in a little clinic in the Dominican countryside, Cho Ray looked to me like a world-class institution. When I mentioned that to a resident working with Hearts Around the World, he balked, “When was the last time you were in a hospital?” A fair critique, I suppose, but, before the end of the week, another member of the team reminisced that the scene wasn’t so different from his memories of residency in America, if a bit more crowded. Cho Ray may not be Mass General, but it is far closer to that gold standard of care than it is to the one-room clinics and lone midwives who care for so much of the world’s population.

Alec Jacobson
On a road in the Quan 1 business district
On the street in the business and shopping district in Quan 1
Boys fishing in a canal off the Saigon River
A view across a branch of the Saigon River
At night in the Quan 1 business district

Rush hour traffic
The parking lot at Cho Ray Hospital
A packed waiting room
Check-in, packed with the morning rush

A corner of the Neurosurgery Critical Care Unit
A doctor rounds in an infectious disease ward where some beds have two patients.
Patients wear green and family members wear yellow in this ward in an infectious disease ward.
Waiting outside a cardiac critical care ward

A patient’s family member looks out over a courtyard between wings of Cho Ray Hospital

There are not facilities for care-providing family members to spend the night in the hospital and so many sleep on the floors wherever they can find a quiet corner.
A quiet moment in an office

A team of cardiologists from Cho Ray Hospital and visiting physicians working with Hearts Around the World examine a patient.
A cardiologist from Cho Ray hospital presents a case to his colleagues and to a team from Hearts Around the World.
During a lecture
Dr. Manuel Fontes from Hearts Around the World examines a patient in the cardiac intensive care unit.

A patient's family member waits by the bedside in the ICU.
In the halls of the infections disease unit
In the cardiac critical care unit
A cardiac bypass operation in the cardiac critical care unit
Patients recover from surgery in the cardiac critical care unit.
Between buildings in the Hospital's main courtyard