

BAD – Dowling Club Report – Nepal - 2019

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I would like to thank the British Association of Dermatologists and the Dowling Club for the fellowship that enabled me to join the overseas trip to Nepal.

The trip was off to a dramatic start with airline crisis and rerouted flights; I arrived in Kathmandu 12 hours later than intended, still smiling and my luggage in tow. Straight to Kaiser Café located within the Garden of Dreams. An oasis in the chaotic capital with floating water lilies in candlelight, air filled with the scent of flowers and birds singing in the background. True to the vision of Dr Geoffrey Dowling, to bring consultants and trainee dermatologists together in learning and social environments, I was warmly welcomed by a table of consultants whom I had not met previously. We shared stories over delicious Nepalese food and cold local beer, which was thoroughly refreshing. The theme of making new connections and sharing experiences resonated throughout the trip.

SODVELONCON, the annual meeting hosted by the Nepalese Society of Dermato-Venereo-Leprology held over two days was packed with high calibre talks from both Nepalese and UK dermatologists. In particular, the role of the microbiome in skin health by Professor Tim Spector was thought-provoking. Professor Dharmendra Karn's excellent plenary session on vitiligo management in darker skin, including melanocyte transfer, longer duration (6 months) of narrowband UVB and topical application of latanoprost. WHO leprosy session in the afternoon was eye-opening and educational. The chairs and speakers highlighted the ongoing battle with leprosy and new promising international study of methotrexate and prednisolone in the management of erythema nodosum leprosum.

The next day, a winding bus journey led us to the Anandaban Leprosy hospital set in the luscious green hillside. It is one of the largest leprosy referral hospitals in Nepal, providing free, high-quality treatment for leprosy complications and reconstructive surgery. I was humbled by the unwavering dedication of the staff at the centre, who care for 6,000 people affected by leprosy, and basic medical services to over 25,000 other people in the region per year. Dr Mahesh Shah, senior consultant dermatologist, has travelled over 35km by bus every day to the hospital for the past 20 years.

In Pokhara, we were introduced to the Green Pastures hospital by the medical director. Dr Vicky Yates, who visited in 1972 on her elective showed us photographs of the original Shinning Hospital, built with bamboo and thatch. The building has since been upgraded and now functions as accommodation and storage. Dr Ramesh Sharma gave us a tour of the outpatient clinics, with the ingenious topical steroids displayed on shelves to educate patients, followed by the orthotics and rehabilitation department. The patients are trained in self-care techniques to ensure that their injuries do not deteriorate. The clinical meeting day was enlightening with cases from the UK and locally. Prof Celia Moss was in her element, teaching and helping to diagnose rare paediatric genetic conditions.

Seeing the patients who were warm, friendly and thankful was unquestionably the highlight of my trip. We were informed that many travel for 3-4 days on foot to the centre, leaving their life and family behind to seek treatment for what is still a highly stigmatised condition affecting not only function but finances and marriage. I was delighted to witness their improvement, an excellent testament to the team.

Serendipity brought me to the Boudhanath Stupa, one of the holiest Tibetan Buddhist temples at sunset. Walking with devoted locals and listening to the rhythmic chants of the monastery as the butter lamps flicker with the breeze is a memory that will stay with me. Other notable activities include eating delicious momos, visiting the Peace Stupa and paragliding at lake Pawa. We were very fortunate to welcome the Nepalese New Year in Kathmandu, making new connections and lasting memories. It was the best finale to this remarkable Dowling club trip.