Luke Foundation Essay

My attention was drawn to Brown University’s international exchange programs through the Medical Chinese pre-clinical elective, and volunteer work with the Medical Chinese Interest Group and APAMS (Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association). I was interested in traveling to China or Taiwan, but since I had already spent a considerable amount of time in Hangzhou, I thought it might be worthwhile to visit a new city. I was also attracted to the National ChengKung University program since it would be taught in English, and I never felt competent enough to learn at a native-level in Chinese, even when I was studying abroad.

Upon arriving in Tainan, Taiwan, I found myself surprised at the modernity and cleanliness of the city. The horse carts I was so used to encountering in China seemed to be replaced by motor scooters and gasoline-powered carts. The air was oppressively humid except when it rained, and was flavored with the exhaust of thousands and thousands of combustion engines putting by in an endless stream.

I had a number of goals for my trip to Asia: I wanted to practice using my Chinese, translating for friends, learn new medical words, gain exposure to “alternative medicine,” and make new friends from a different culture. I am happy to say that almost all my goals were accomplished. Student volunteers from NCKU’s Chinese medicine interest group were happy to spend time with American students, and I spoke Chinese with them and with locals. These Taiwanese medical students also assisted in teaching our Chinese medicine class, and were likely some of the most effective lecturers, given their language skills. Most of the Chinese physicians who came to lecture us, unfortunately, did not have a mastery of English that permitted efficient and fluid communication. My understanding of Chinese medicine was greatly expanded due to my ability to understand many of our professors’ explanations in Chinese, while they were translated by the Taiwanese medical students. Many of the concepts behind Traditional Chinese Medicine seemed antiquated, however, and even defied conventional logic. I would have liked to have a lecture by a native English speaker who practices acupuncture, to smooth out some wrinkles in logic.

Before my trip to Taiwan, I had only a basic idea of what Traditional Chinese Medicine was, the logic it employed, and its available treatments. The curriculum of the Taiwan program was well laid-out, organized, and managed to touch upon a number of different disciplines. I can’t say enough good things about the Chinese doctors we had as lecturers; many of them were more than happy to meet us out of class. The doctor who taught about acupuncture even let me visit his clinic and performed acupuncture on my chronic knee injury. No program is perfect, however, and many instructors could have better language skills. In the future, perhaps, the course might try having lecturers speak in Mandarin, then having a fluent English-speaker translate.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Taiwan. I think it will color my future practice, and will make me think more readily of Chinese and alternative medicines. I am grateful for the opportunity to travel to Taiwan, and to explore the country. I look forward to future travels there, and to more chances to learn about Chinese Medicine. I would certainly recommend this program to future Brown Med/PLMEs, but I don’t think it should be advertised as a program that is primarily for English speakers. A good facility with Chinese should be a pre-requisite.
Reflection: NCKU Chinese Medicine and Cross Cultural Bioethics

The summer of 2012 was full of international travel for me. I started out in Honduras where I worked in a small village with diabetic patients. The village was secluded in the mountains and had unreliable electricity and no hot water. Later that summer, I was given the opportunity to attend a class at NCKU in Tainan, Taiwan. Prior to my arrival in Taiwan I expected that there would be noticeable differences between it and Honduras – especially given that I was coming as a student of Traditional Chinese Medicine and not as a health care provider. While in Taiwan, I learned a few things about Chinese Medicine and an even more about culture, communication and education.

I would be lying if I said I learned everything there is know about Chinese Medicine during my short two-week stay in Tainan, but I did learn about the general concepts and beliefs of Traditional Chinese Medicine. There was opportunity to shadow a TCM doctor in Tainan and even do some hands on learning. However, this was the first year NCKU offered the class, and at times it was difficult to understand concepts simply because the terminology was fuzzy as it tried to relate to modern medicine.

Regardless of this, I found this to be an enjoyable and highly rewarding experience. It gave me insight on what it must feel like to be a patient. There I was, learning a new science, a new language, and I felt lost some of the time. I realized that, perhaps, some patients (of TCM, modern medicine or otherwise) must feel lost within the medical world, with its foreign language and sometimes counter-intuitive concepts. It is our duty as physicians to communicate with our patients and do our best to make sure they walk away from the medical encounter with as many tools as they need to navigate their illness into recovery.

In my application for funding for the course, I stated that I hoped to gain insight on TCM practices as Chinese immigrants make up the second largest minority group in the United States, and I wanted to be at least a little acquainted with medical practices that they may be familiar with. Although I cannot consider myself an expert and I never will be, I did learn many things about TCM, Taiwanese culture, and about myself in that setting. I am grateful that now I can add that bit of knowledge to my medical experience to become a more culturally competent doctor, when the time comes.

The program is extremely new and, though it is still evolving, I would recommend it to other medical students. It was obvious that the staff at NCKU cared deeply about providing the medical students with a positive and constructive experience. Though it is hard to fit the entirety of Chinese medicine into a two-week survey course, it was very informative and provided insight into Chinese medical culture. I am extremely grateful to the Luke Foundation for their support and encouragement.