

A man with short brown hair, wearing a black and white striped polo shirt and light-colored trousers, stands with his hands on his hips in front of a massive, ancient-looking tree with dense green foliage. The background shows a grassy area with other people and buildings in the distance under a clear blue sky.

芒果 · 熱情與心臟科 一段難忘的南台灣夏日友誼與探境

Mangos, heat and cardiology: a summer of friendship and discovery in Tainan.

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I was happy when I got the answer from IFMSA for a clinical clerkship : I was heading for Taiwan! I quickly learned that I was also very lucky, for Taiwan was also my first choice of destination in my application form, and very few people actually get their first choice. And my luck didn't stop there. Once in NCKU, I was finally told that instead of spending the month in Emergency Medicine, as originally planned, I would be sharing my time with Cardiology as well. Cardiology just happened to be one of my favourite subjects in the two years of pre-clinical studies I had just completed, so it is with great excitement that I started the month of June in the National Cheng Kung University Hospital.

Needless to say, I was full of expectations.

But not without a few worries. I didn't know anything about Taiwan, except for what I had read in my travel guide and on the Internet. I also didn't know what to expect from the hospital in NCKU, or from the Taiwanese health care system in general. Would I be able to adapt? Would I be completely lost? And what about life in Taiwan? Would I get sick on the food (like it happened to me in another Asian country)? Should I worry about thieves? I got on the plane with my head full of questions, my bag full of medication, and my suitcase full of spare cash and credit cards. A short 24 hours of airports and airplanes later, I was landing in Taipei, and within minutes those worries started to dissipate to make way for all the enjoyment that was lying in the days ahead!



One weekend in Taipei was enough to grasp the essence of the Taiwanese people, as I discovered all the little quirks that make the Taiwanese people so unique: they are polite, they line up in the subway and in stores, many of them speak English, they offer assistance when they see a white guy staring down at a map, they are patient when communication is difficult... overall, they are incredibly welcoming! And that was only Taipei. Fellow students and doctors in NCKU later told me that they found the people in Taipei too stressed, too impolite... And indeed, I quickly realized that people in Tainan display a kindness on a whole other level! Being Canadian, I know that my own countrymen have an excellent reputation for being exceptionally nice, a fact I like to remind myself during my travels, when I am sometimes confronted with “difficult” people. But even Canadian kindness could never measure up to what I experienced during my time in Tainan!

This wonderful experience first took shape in my relations with the local students, doctors and staff of the Cardiology department. The fellow clerks welcomed me along their ranks and treated me as an equal, taking time to show me around the ward, the computer system, and accompanying me to visit patients and help me communicate with them. Even going beyond the hospital, they brought me along for good food outside, great iced tea, and one unforgettable scooter ride. I was greeted with the same enthusiasm and kindness by the residents, fellows and staff of the department. One after another, they took time off from their busy schedules to answer my many questions and introduce me to the art of cardiology. They even bothered to throw challenges at me, in the form of differential diagnoses, ECG interpretations, and even presenting a case report at the weekly meeting, thereby adding incredible worth to my learning experience.

I couldn't have been happier about the support I received from the cardiology department, and to make things even better, it also quickly became evident that I would be spending the month surrounded by people who are not only kind, but also brilliant, and answer to the same standards of evidence-based medicine as our hospitals back home. The science and level of patient care that I witnessed in NCKU hospital was top-notch, on the same level as, and in some aspects superior to, the medical practice in Canadian hospitals. The equipment was modern, the patient rooms were spacious (yes believe me, compared with our hospitals, NCKUH rooms are like executive suites), there were plenty of nurses and staff going around to answer to patients' needs, and there were teaching activities going on with clerks, interns and residents everywhere I turned my head. Truly, I was impressed!

On a side note, I also noticed the presence of many family members around patients, something which I believe should be encouraged more in our Canadian hospitals. Our approach in the West is usually to limit the number of visitors, and the hours during which they can be present, so the nurses and staff are able to do their work faster and more efficiently (or at least I assume that's the reason, but in truth I cannot explain why our visiting privileges are so restricted). However, it seems to me like patients benefit greatly from having their loved ones around them during their healing process, so to see them surrounded like that came as somewhat of a revelation to me. It also tells a lot about the importance of family, particularly of elders, in Asian cultures. Such family involvement is an example to follow.

I was also greatly impressed by Taiwan's universal coverage policies for health insurance. It is certainly not perfect, but it makes Taiwan shine as an example of solidarity by providing affordable and equal access to health care for all its citizens. In a time where countries like Canada, who have

enjoyed many decades of public health insurance, are starting to open the door to a growing presence of private interests and profit-driven strategies in health care, it was comforting to see a country like Taiwan push towards a public system.

I profited greatly from the weeks I spent in cardiology. I learned a lot about PCI, ECGs, echocardiography, patient care, diagnostics, etc. But on top of that, I found many new friendships and amazing experiences that I will always cherish. This was a wonderful learning experience, surrounded by wonderful people in a wonderful country. I couldn't have asked for more, and I thank you all once again.

