Trekking and Medical Students – A Nepalese Perspective

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Abstract: Nepal is a small developing country in South Asia. The land of the Himalayas has villages perched on hillsides and trekking or walking is necessary to reach many of them. The medical schools in Nepal attract students from different countries. The students are predominantly from urban areas. The main trekking regions have well developed infrastructure and can serve as a gentle introduction to rural Nepal. Trekking can lead to closer bonds between students of different nationalities and between the teachers and the taught. The students learn to interact with rural communities. The physical benefits of trekking are obvious. Students can work in primary health care facilities and learn to manage disease and ill health at a community level. These treks can serve as a foundation for longer stays in rural areas and for community diagnosis sessions. With the restoration of peace programs of trekking, family studies and long stays in rural areas can be reactivated.

Keywords: Community diagnosis, Nepal, Primary healthcare, Rural areas, Trekking

The collision of the Indian plate with the Eurasian plate created the Himalayas- the youngest and highest of the Earth’s mountains. The Himalayas extend from Afghanistan to Myanmar. But the land of the Himalayas is Nepal with 8 of the 14 peaks above 8000 m.

Nepal is a developing country sandwiched between China and India. Recently a number of medical schools have opened in Nepal and the schools attract students from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and other countries. A large number of tourists come to Nepal to trek and enjoy the remarkable culture of the country. Many young medical students from the West come to Nepal to do their electives partly drawn by the magnificent scenery.

Medical schools and students in Nepal - Most of the students in medical schools in Nepal are from urban areas and from privileged backgrounds. Doctors in South Asia are reluctant to serve in rural areas. Community orientation and spending time in rural areas may be helpful in introducing students to the realities of rural life. The Institute of Medicine at Kathmandu, Nepal the first medical school in Nepal has a strong community orienta-
tion program. Students spend time (about a month) in rural communities and come to terms with the problems of the community in detail and suggest possible solutions.

**Community orientation in new medical schools** - The newer medical schools are in the process of starting their community orientation programs. Trekking can serve as an introduction to rural life. Nepal has a number of national parks and the famous Annapurna, Everest, Langtang and Helambu trekking regions. The main trekking areas have good lodges and a well-developed trekking infrastructure. They can serve as a gentle introduction to rural Nepal.

**Students on a trek** - I have often accompanied students on treks and I can vouch for the fact that students enjoy the experience. There is something
wonderful in walking under a clear blue sky, fording small streams, watching villagers thresh grain or being watched by black faced monkeys in the forest. Trekking leads to the development of close bonds of camaraderie and friendship among students of various nationalities. The Nepalese can take pride in showing their beautiful country to others. However, many times the trek serves as the first introduction to rural Nepal for many Nepalese students who were born and raised in Kathmandu. Trekking also leads to closer bonds between the students and the accompanying faculty members. The parties can interact outside the four walls of the classroom. Students learn to take more responsibility and trekking can promote self-reliance.

**Overnight stays** - Previously our treks used to last for four or five days. We used to settle down in a lodge on the first day. From the next day we used to conduct family and community studies. We used to run a medical clinic in the evenings. The stay molded the students and faculty members into a functioning team. The students learned to interact with a more traditional rural community. The community in trekking areas had interacted with Western trekkers and may be more used to a different and more urbanized culture. Thus students would have an easier time interacting with these communities.

**Physical benefits of trekking** - The physical benefits of trekking are obvious. There is nothing to beat going up and down hills to stay in shape and improve the aerobic capacity. The Sun, wind, fresh food, clean air and hard work
dramatically improve the health of the students and the teachers. There is something intrinsically appealing in being away from the hustle and bustle of civilization. Away from the reach of the internal combustion engine. The quiet and peace in the villages has to be experienced to be appreciated!

**Stimulus to creativity** - The wonderful scenery acts as a powerful stimulus to creative forces lying dormant within one. The scenery can inspire poets, writers, painters and singers to creative heights. ‘The Himals’ offer endless creative opportunities to photographers.

**Working in primary health centers** - The Nepalese healthcare system functions at three levels. The sub health post and the health post serve as the first level of contact of most individuals with the healthcare system. Students can be posted in health posts and learn about common diseases in the community, their management at the primary care level and measures for preventing diseases and improving health.

**Foundation for a rural career** - These brief visits can introduce students to rural Nepal and can serve as the base for longer stays in village communities. The students can be prepared to stay in villages which may not be on the trekking circuit. These stays will serve to introduce students to rural health problems and help them suggest possible solutions with the involvement of the local community. The students will be better equipped to serve in rural areas after graduation. Thus trekking can serve as a wonderful introduction for students to rural Nepal and can be one of the steps towards creating more socially aware and responsible doctors.

After 2002 with the intensifying of the insurgency and the worsening security situation the treks and overnight stays have been suspended. I personally feel that it was a great pity and a big loss! With the restoration of a tentative peace the programs of trekking, family studies and community diagnosis can be restarted and strengthened.