

Culture & Medicine: a Bangkok, Thailand Travelogue

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Introduction & Background

- In 2002, Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) was passed with the aim of providing essential preventative, curative, and palliative care to all Thai citizens of every age¹. This was created with the goal of reducing financial barriers for the impoverished.
- The implementation of the UCS reduced Thailand's uninsured population in both urban and rural areas. There was also an observed shift in health services uses, with the urban poor and rural populations utilizing more primary care services².
- To better understand how patient care was impacted by both the universal health care system and more generally by the Thai culture, I traveled to Bangkok, Thailand in 2018 to work as volunteer medical assistant at the Siriraj Primary Care Unit.

Aims

During my time in Bangkok, Thailand, my main aims were to:

- Explore how patient care was impacted by the universal health care system
- Apply my personal understanding and knowledge about Thai culture to patient care.

Experience 1: Primary Care Clinic

- While working in the Siriraj Hospital Primary Care Unit [Fig. 1], I observed that most patients were being treated for complications arising from Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus.
- Studies have shown that Thai patients manage their diabetes based on cultural beliefs, such as karma and other traditional beliefs⁴.
- The management of diabetes is further complicated by the Thai cuisine, which mostly consists of rice and tropical fruits [Fig. 2] with high sugar content⁵.

Experience 2: Rural Palliative Medicine

- One study on palliative medicine in Thailand demonstrated that important factors during visits include receiving the full truth about their illness and passing away at home³.
- I went on rural home visits [Fig. 3], helping to provide palliative care to patients with terminal illnesses. We visited a gentleman who was known in his village for his 'jok' porridge shop, and learned how his chronic illness affected his livelihood [Fig. 4].
- Aside from providing medical care, we provided spiritual counseling focused on Buddhist principles and discussed in detail the legacy his porridge shop would leave behind.



Figure 1: The Siriraj Primary Care Unit



Figure 2: Tropical Fruits and sweet desserts



Figure 3: Rural outskirts of Thailand



Figure 4: Rural home visit with palliative care patient, shared with permission from patient

Summary Points

- Cultural considerations regarding cuisine and traditions are not only important, but critical, in the medical management of Thai patients.
- Cuisine is a key cornerstone of Thai culture, subsequently impacting health outcomes; a deep understanding of cuisine is subsequently important when counseling patients on setting realistic lifestyle modifications.
- My experience with rural palliative medicine in Thailand allowed me to see the value of holistic medicine in treating patients with terminal illnesses.
- Understanding a patient's purpose and drive for living, as well as their concerns for after they pass, are important aspects to be addressed during counseling.

References

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