

Rural Family Medicine in Nalerigu, Ghana

Maxime Billick

McGill Medical School, Class of 2017

March 2016

Day-to-Day Work

Location



Baptist Medical Centre was founded in 1958. It is a 123-bed hospital with both male and female wards, a pediatrics unit, isolation wards for tuberculosis and meningitis, several operating rooms, a birthing unit, and a walk-in clinic. Most recent yearly statistics are as follows: 60,000 outpatient visits, 10,000 inpatients, 1,200 major operations, and 2,500-3,000 minor procedures.



Under the beating midday sun in Nalerigu, Ghana, Dr. Vince and I approached the small but haunting morgue. We walked towards the cadaver of a pregnant woman who had died overnight from uncontrollable eclampsia. Bundled in an ironically lively-patterned Ghanaian cloth, then wrapped again in a crisp white sheet with occasional decorations, we opened it up like an envelope – just exposing the middle – as though if we kept her face and hair and fingernails and knees covered, we might forget that this was a real person who was living and breathing 24 hours prior.

Dr. Vince guided me through my first cesarean as the primary surgeon. Meconium-stained amniotic fluid gushed out and with it, the hint of rotting flesh. Despite the morbid circumstances, I still experienced the rush of adrenaline when the baby's head emerged from the artificial orifice. The mother had died under terrible and unavoidable conditions given our resources. We delivered the baby, but instead of being a joyous moment of celebration, I remained frustrated that all we could offer was the dignity of an honorable burial thereafter. I felt powerless that I could do little else, yet it was in that precise moment I recognized a career with an ongoing commitment to international medicine would help me prevent future needless deaths like this.



Outside the Hospital



As in most markets I've seen around the world, the market in Nalerigu has a predictable set-up with specific dedicated areas: Tomato Trail. Lettuce Lane. Cloth Causeway. Peanut Pass. Stinky-dried-fish Street. And don't you forget, Mango Motorway. Despite the obvious separations, one area overflows into another. The market is a cacophony of colours and noises and people and things. You have to watch where you step because there's often fruit and flowing water and children underfoot.



Cape Coast

The Cape Coast castle is white-washed, imprinted by the wind and salt of the sea, standing relatively unmarked given the atrocities that took place there. It was the epicenter of the trans-Atlantic slave trade put in place first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch, then by the Brits. The guides take you on a tour of the men's and women's dungeons, describe the horrific living conditions, elaborate on the common practice of raping women, and never fail to point out the church that sits atop the dungeons below. "Business was separate from religion," we were informed. For all the slaves taken from here, 1/3 died in the castles, 1/3 died on the boat trips across the Atlantic, and 1/3 made it alive, albeit sometimes barely.



While I sat there with head after head in my lap, lying on church benches placed outside in the direct West African sun at midday, I got into a groove and began to enjoy the tooth-pulling. It was a lesson in patience, in dexterity, in strength and subtlety. At the end of the day, I had my pile of mildly gruesome goodies – the teeth at my feet. I felt my grandmother, Anita, the first female orthodontist in Quebec and the third in Canada, looking down upon me. I thought of her father, Frank, who was one of the first Jewish dentists to go to McGill. I felt a type of pride for continuing on their legacy, whether it be just for one day pulling teeth, or for many years to come as a future doctor.

