Rural Family Medicine in Nalerigu, Ghana

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Day-to-Day Work

Under the beating midday sun in Nalerigu, Ghana, Dr. Vince and I approached the small but bustling market. We walked towards the cadaver of a pregnant woman who had died from complications during childbirth. The scene was a stark reminder of the harsh realities faced by women in sub-Saharan Africa. We were informed that she had died under terrible and unavoidable conditions given our resources. We delivered the baby, but instead of a celebration, there was a sense of mourning.

Dr. Vince guided me through my first cesarean as the primary surgeon. Mucous-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 horrible and unavoidable conditions, and we were left to face the consequences.

I approached the small but haunting morgue. We walked towards the cadaver of a pregnant woman who had died under terrible and unavoidable conditions. I remained frustrated that all we could offer was the dignity of an honorable burial. In that precise moment, I recognized a career with an ongoing commitment to international medicine would help me prevent future needless deaths like this.

Cape Coast

The Cape Coast castle is white washed, tinged with the wind and salt of the sea, standing relatively unmarked given the atrocities that took place there. It was the epicenter of the transatlantic 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, the trans Procedures.

1,200 major operations, and 2,500 minor procedures.

While I sat there with head after head in my lap, lying on church benches placed outside in the direct West African sun, I encountered a sense of joy and began to enjoy the tooth pulling. It was a lesson in tenacity, in the way that the rich and the poor live in pockets of joy.

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. Banana Bazaar. Mango Motorway. Despite the obvious separations, one area overflows into another. The market is a cacophony of colours and voices and people and things. You have to watch where you step because there’s often fruit and flowing water and children underfoot.

The gaps between the vendors are small and personal space is nonexistent. People shout and squeeze by as the sun burns down overhead. My sweat trickles down my temples in mini cascading waterfalls. The colors are overwhelming. The crossroad of multiple vendors blurred into each other: yelling and honking and motorcycles growling and “We take the sale!” shouted by children and women of vendors persuading you towards their goods. Fabrics hung up for sale and clouded cloth wrapped around heads and waists, and straps of baskets slung off shoulders. Eyes kicked up by endless movement and the blinding sun creating pockets of heat and shade and shade and shade. And within all this there’s a dissonance if you want to pick it apart and analyze its organization and logic, but also a beautiful harmony of movement and the blinding sun creating pockets of heat and shade and shade and shade.