

REPORT FROM THE FIELD - SHANXI, CHINA

I just returned from a fascinating trip to Inner Mongolia to visit a partner hospital. I thought you might appreciate a quick report complete with a few pictures I took.

It takes three airplanes and 26 hours of travel time to get to Shanxi, China. That's just one reason why nobody goes there. It's one of China's poorest provinces and nicknamed the "coal warehouse of China." Afflicted with some of the world's worst pollution, the sky looked as dreary and bleak as the terrain. If emphysema ever became a town, this would be it.



After a bumpy van ride we arrived at the hospital. It's a 55-year old, run-down, dark and dingy, dirt-poor, government hospital with exposed light bulbs, dark hallways, bad smells, crumbling walls, and stairs. But from the big smiles on the faces of everyone we met, you'd have thought they were all working at The Ritz.

As we toured the hospital they proudly showed us their "state-of-the-art" facilities, quality plaques on the wall, and most importantly, thousands of before-and-after pictures of children they had saved from a lifetime of pain and suffering. The quality of their work was very excellent.

We met dozens of cleft patients and their families who had come from near and far to take advantage of our free cleft surgery program. The average income in this area is about \$238 per year, or, about 65 cents a day. Without The Smile Train, none of these children would ever receive surgery.



We met many parents who had adopted babies after finding them abandoned on the side of the road. Even though they barely have enough food to feed themselves these Good Samaritans open their homes and their hearts to a crying, deformed baby they stumble across.



The nurses proudly showed us piles of old clothes they had collected to give to poor patients and their families - these are very poor people helping even poorer people. We saw hundreds of pictures of patients laughing, smiling and hugging nurses, doctors, administrators. "Treat patient like family" read one caption.

I wondered how these people could be so compassionate, professional, dedicated, giving, happy and upbeat when they were surrounded by such desperate surroundings and a million good excuses to fail, be bitter, mad, angry and selfish.



The tour ended with a presentation that covered their Smile Train program. Different doctors, nurses and administrators spoke. All of them used the word "we", again and again and again. It was obvious that The Smile Train was their program, this was their team, these were their children that they were helping. This is how The Smile Train builds self-sufficiency in very poor but very proud communities.

Unlike missions that send American doctors and nurses, local doctors and nurses in developing countries are the stars of The Smile Train program. With a little training and financial support, a little encouragement and respect, you can empower these ordinary people to do extraordinary things.



Before The Smile Train, this hospital performed 20 cleft surgeries a year. This year they will operate on more than 500 children! Wow. No wonder they're proud. This pride is the real fuel that runs The Smile Train. It is more powerful than money.

At a banquet lunch featuring such "delicacies" as donkey-meat burgers and chicken feet, we toasted our partners' success and thanked them. They beamed. We then climbed into an old van and set out to visit patient homes up in the hills where the poorest of the poor live.

Our first stop was a family that was well-known because four of their children had cleft surgery. I should say, four of their adopted children. This family adopted seven children in seven years. Each baby they adopted had been abandoned.

Mr. Fan, in the middle, is 32 years old. That's his father on the right, his wife next to him and his mom on the far left. These are five of their kids, three more are asleep inside. Eight children and six adults live in their three-room, unheated, crumbling brick house with no front door. They feel lucky to live here as 20 years ago this family lived in a cave.



We went inside the house and found three babies asleep on a communal bed. It was 20 degrees outside. The only heat was coming from a wood fire in the kitchen. The kitchen ceiling was black from decades of smoke. Mr. Fan was very happy The Smile Train was able to help his children. Each child had a severe cleft and without surgery, life would have been a very long and painful struggle. We thanked him for letting us visit and wished him and his family well.



Next we drove up into the hills to visit a family that is not as well off as the Fan Family. The road changed from cement to mud and the snow and ice got worse as we went higher. There were no guard rails. After we passed a truck hanging off a cliff we learned how to shout "slow down" in Chinese. Finally, the van stopped at an old commune and we scrambled out and climbed a dirt path up towards some caves.



The Liu Family owns a very small plot of land but they can't grow enough food to live on so the neighbors help them get by.

The Lius are pictured here with their 13 year old

daughter and an adopted daughter, Li. Seven years ago, Mrs. Liu came across a 3 day old crying baby in a box and kept walking. She passed her again later that afternoon, still crying and kept walking. She came across her again at dusk, it was getting cold. She picked the baby up and brought her home. The Liu's home is a one room cave. I have been to many poor places in the world but I have never met anyone who is living in a cave in the year 2005.



The Lius were very happy with the surgery Belle received and thankful it was free. Despite our best efforts, little Belle never smiled, not once. When we said good bye, Mr. Liu presented us with three bags of grain as a present. This was awkward to say the least. We politely declined, he insisted, our interpreter explained we had to accept his gift. We took the grain, thanked them and left.

I apologize for writing such a long letter. But I thought you would appreciate seeing how we are spending the very generous support you have given us.



These days, you never know where some donations end up. This much I do know. This problem of clefts is a major problem. There are millions of children in developing countries walking around with holes in their faces. They and their parents are poorer than you can possibly imagine. Without programs like The Smile Train, these kids have no chance.

After taking trips like this for more than a decade, I can tell you that The Smile Train program is by far, the most cost-efficient, safe, and productive way to help these kids. Few charities can have such an incredible impact for such a low cost.

By empowering local doctors and hospitals, we provide surgery for as little as \$250. These people can do amazing things - they can save an unbelievable number of children - if we give them just a little help.

Some day, I hope you get the chance to meet some of these doctors and nurses. I know you'd be as impressed as I was. And if you ever got the chance to meet some of these children, their parents, these heroes that bring home babies they find on the side of the road, I promise you would be very proud to be a supporter of The Smile Train. Without supporters who help us as generously as you do, none of this would be happening.



Thank you for helping us help them.

Handwritten signature of Brian in blue ink.

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