

2016 AURA Report: Justin Park (South Korea & The Philippines)

In May 2016, I traveled to Seoul, Korea for a two-week intensive shadowing at St. Mary's Hospital of Catholic University. I was given the opportunity to observe as a student shadow at the department of neurosurgery under the supervision of Dr. Yongsam Shin. During the two weeks, I was paired with a 4th-year medical student in observing morning rotations, various surgical procedures, and case analysis meetings. Although I was enlightened by the groundbreaking medicine that was practiced at this nationally renowned hospital, I was more fascinated by how unique aspects of Korean culture were manifested in a hospital setting in both positive and negative ways.

I was thoroughly impressed by how patient-centric the Korean hospital's system was in terms of affordability, comfort, and care. According to the medical student, whom eventually became my primary source of information, the government strictly controls the healthcare sector by providing universal health coverage to all its citizens and regulating the cost of procedures offered at hospitals. This allowed for easy and affordable access to healthcare, which naturally resulted in large patient volume. This, in combination with Koreans' cultural propensity for speed (often referred to as "*bbali bbali*"), created a healthcare environment in which efficiency is highly prioritized. I was able to thoroughly witness this efficiency in action during the two weeks of my observation. Doctors, nurses, and other staff members physically moved quickly to accommodate the medical and nonmedical needs of patients and families. Outpatients were in and out within minutes, allowing one doctor to see dozens of patients in a matter of couple hours. The use of technology was prevalent to digitalize several miscellaneous tasks to reduce waiting time by patients. Self-kiosks were stationed across the hospital where patients can pay for bills, receive prescriptions, and make appointments. It was easy to conclude that Korea is perhaps one of the best places in the world to get sick in. (I was reminded of this yet again when I came down with strep throat a month later. I was able to see an ENT specialist and get my prescription all within 30 minutes while spending below \$30 USD. I did not even have Korean health insurance.)

As an aspiring doctor, however, I was more interested in observing the physicians' side of healthcare in Korea. Unfortunately, it was rather grim. The doctors were visibly overworked to accommodate the large volume of patients and procedures. In fact, every doctor that I've engaged in a conversation with told me about their dreams and desires to practice in the U.S.,



One of many brain surgeries I observed at Seoul St. Mary's. A typical day would consist of a morning conference, post-op rounds, then at least one invasive procedure.

where they would be compensated higher and overall treated better for their work. In addition, the workplace culture for physicians was uninviting. The hierarchy among doctors was rigid and more often than not a source of hostility. The hospital, despite having official affiliations with a medical school, did not feel like an environment conducive to learning. The lower-ranked residents did not dare to question or even speak in the presence of an attending surgeon. The residents were overtly cautious in everything they spoke and did. Lastly, the educational or financial background of a doctor, or a student, seemed to dictate how the person is perceived and treated. I, myself, was not only asked the name of my university on several occasions, but also the place of residence within Korea and my parents' occupation, all of which are hints as to how wealthy or educated I am. Granted, they may have been mere icebreakers; however, during my time there, the medical student whom I had followed was not only asked of his undergraduate college by his superiors, but was also given condescending remarks regarding his college. It was incredibly shocking to witness such behavior in person, especially given that he was a Korea University graduate, which is ranked as one of top colleges in the nation.

Shortly after the completion of my shadowing at St. Mary's, I traveled to the Philippines for a month-long medical volunteer trip as a Summer International Health Fellow with FIMRC (Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children). From day one, I was able to observe the stark contrast of the living conditions and healthcare quality between Korea and the Philippines. The first two weeks were spent in Manila, mainly at its clinic located in the district of Tondo, which is a densely populated slum known for its extreme pollution. This Catholic-run clinic, called Canossa Health and Social Center, caters to the residents of Tondo and provides basic medical services for free. At the clinic, I was able to observe a family physician examine dozens of patients, whose symptoms often suggested diseases and conditions that are quite rare in the U.S. (most notably tuberculosis and mumps). I also had the opportunity to visit the University of the Philippines General Hospital, which is one of the largest hospitals in the city, and observe its unsanitary and unacceptably inadequate conditions. Pools of blood stained the floor, air conditioning was nonexistent, and electricity was unstable. The other two weeks were spent in Cavite, a rural province hours away from Manila. In Cavite, I was asked to create educational material for Filipino women in cancers affecting women, especially breast cancer, utilizing my talent in graphic design. I also accompanied local volunteers and nurses in visiting homes and informing the residents of their risks for heart disease and diabetes. It was Cavite where I also got to experience the true Filipino style of living, filled with familial warmth and rustic cuisine.



My last day at the Canossa Health and Social Center with all the nurses, doctors, sisters, and volunteers.