

Tzu Chi Free Medical Clinic Treats 4,100 People in Sri Lanka

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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From July 13 to 15, a team of 158 volunteers from Tzu Chi hospitals, the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) and the Tzu Chi Foundation held a free medical clinic in the south of Sri Lanka. They treated more than 4,100 patients. Many suffered from chronic illnesses they had been unable to cure due to poverty and lack of medical knowledge.

Since the South Asian Tsunami of 2004, the Foundation has conducted different charity projects in Sri Lanka, including the provision of free medical services in remote areas. This three-day large-scale clinic was held in Baduraliya Divisional Hospital in Kalutara, which is about 40 kilometers south of the capital Colombo. Most of the residents work on tea farms or rubber plantations; they receive a low income and have limited access to transport. It is difficult for them to receive the medical treatment they need.

The team of doctors, nurses, and pharmacists came from Tzu Chi hospitals in Hualien, Taipei, Taichung and Yuli in Taiwan and the TIMA in Singapore; they provided surgery, internal medicine, ophthalmology, dentistry and traditional Chinese medicine.



A group of volunteers arrived at the site in advance to set up the clinic and clean the hospital with its staff. Arun, a head nurse who has worked there for 14 years, said that all the staff of the hospital were very happy for Tzu Chi to hold a free clinic there. It was the first time that a charity organization has held a free clinic in the local area. Tzu Chi could help her hospital to benefit more patients, she said.

In the early morning of July 13, there was a long queue in front of the free clinic. Many had walked over an hour to reach the site. Local people mainly speak Sinhala; many medical and nursing students of the University of Colombo and KDU acted as interpreters. A fourth-year nursing student said that she not only learnt medical knowledge, but also saw the humility of the medical personnel. She wishes to become a nurse in whom her patients have trust and confidence, she said.



During the free clinic, 217 patients needed surgical operations. One of the surgeons was Dr. Chun-Ming Chang, who has participated in many free medical clinics in Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia. He said that he was very grateful to see the well-equipped surgery room. This was thanks to a group of volunteers from Singapore; they arrived in Sri Lanka in advance with

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all the surgical equipment they could carry and set up the operation room. They even added air conditioning.

Due to the poverty and lack of medical knowledge, many residents have suffered long years of illness for which they only needed a simple treatment or operation. For example, a 67-year-old man, Munipeme, had a 10-cm-diameter tumor on his back; for the past 20 years, he could not lay on his back. Now, after the removal of the tumor, Munipeme can lay on his back and enjoy a good night's sleep.

Premasiri, 59, has had a wound on his foot for over 20 years. It was painful and often attracted flies. Walking barefoot only worsened the condition. In the free clinic, doctors immediately treated the wound, wrote down a prescription, and asked him to wear shoes in order to protect his foot to heal the wound. Volunteers also prepared a pair of slippers for him.

Many patients entered in the clinic with discomfort -- but walked out with satisfaction and a smile on their faces. Dr. Chin-Hua Fu, a neurologist of Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital, was touched by their smiles; he said that he will treasure the blessings he has and bring together more people to relieve those who are suffering.



In the clinic of traditional Chinese medicine, doctors relieved the musculoskeletal pain of patients caused by heavy manual work. One patient had high blood pressure but had decided by himself to stop taking medicine; even after doctors gave him the medicine, his blood pressure reading was still too high, at 200 mmHg. So he was taken to the Chinese medicine clinic. Dr. Yi-Zhe Zheng, of Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital, used acupuncture to help ease his blood pressure. It was the first time that Dr. Zheng has attended an overseas free clinic. Although there was a language barrier, the doctor used observation, feeling the pulse and palpation to make an evaluation.

Dr. Udaya Issac Rathnayake, the head of the Kalutara Health District, once attended TIMA's annual conference; he was very supportive of the free medical service. After the event, he said: "There are no words to express my gratitude to you. In these few days, I saw how everyone helped those extremely poor residents of Kalutara unconditionally. I learnt a lot and understand more about Buddhism and the spirit of Tzu Chi."

In 2017, TIMA held over 533 free clinics around Taiwan, which benefited more than 44,000 patients. The members of TIMA care for those in need according to where they live. If there is a need, they will form teams and travel long distances to see patients who need their help. They wish to spread Great Love around the world.