



CHRISTIAN FRIENDS OF KOREA

조선의 그리스도인 벗들

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“Be joyful in HOPE, be patient in affliction, be faithful in prayer.” Romans 12:12

CFK Team Makes a Productive Technical Visit to the DPRK Despite Tensions

A CFK delegation including 12 team members returned to the DPRK from August 30–September 17 for work projects and to initiate treatment for hepatitis B patients. Increasing tensions resulted in a host of issues: our trip was delayed by 12 days and shortened by 5, forcing multiple team members to cancel due to resulting scheduling conflicts, and a last-minute visa issue prevented 3 team members from participating. While we were in country, severe flooding took place along the northern border area, along with a ballistic missile launch, and a nuclear test. Nonetheless, we are grateful for a large amount of work that was successfully completed.

We had several goals for the visit including: running baseline diagnostics and starting patients on hepatitis B therapy for the first time in both Kaesong and Pyongyang; unpacking and installing lab equipment and supplies at the Pyongyang #2 Hepatitis Hospital Lab; delivering parts and supplies to the roofing tile-making machine; changing out blowers, certifying the biosafety cabinets, and resuming in-depth technical training at the National TB Reference Lab; and renovating the Kaesong #2 Hepatitis Hospital laboratory.

By God’s grace, much work was accomplished despite all the challenges. In addition, we were also able to deliver two



Dr. Alice Lee, Heidi Linton, and Sue Huntley with staff of the Pyongyang #2 Hepatitis Hospital and newly arrived Hepatitis B medicine

workshops in the Training Center – one on TB diagnostics and the other on hepatitis B diagnostics and treatment. We also participated in several meetings related to our ongoing work with local care givers and partners, and responded quickly to the flooding catastrophe on the northern border counties of North Hamgyong Province by releasing pre-positioned stock from our warehouse in Pyongyang.

Rejoicing in Hope: Hepatitis B Medicines Available for the First Time in DPRK

On the morning that we were rolling out the delivery of hepatitis B medicines to patients for the very first time in the DPRK, the Daily Light devotional reading for September 7th came from Romans 12:12 – “be joyful in hope.” This devotional, put together more than 100 years ago, could not have been more perfectly appropriate for this day.

The project document that we have put together to guide the diagnostic and treatment program for hepatitis B in the DPRK is called **HOPE** (Hepatitis B Overview and Program to trEat). There have been many months of planning and tremendous amounts of work done by many people, including our partner organizations, Hepatitis B Free (Australia) and Global Care Partners, and incredibly generous contributions from multiple donors, including the donors of the medicines



Life-saving Hepatitis B medicine at Pyongyang #2 Hepatitis Hospital awaiting distribution

(Tenofovir and Entecavir) used in the program. We began with pre-screening over 750 patients in November last year and March/May of this year. The morning of September 7th found us preparing to start the first (and sickest) patients on drug treatment. What a beautiful confirmation it was to read the passage for that morning and be reminded that our God is the God of Hope.



Top: (left) Tenofovir; (right) Entecavir; Bottom: Pyongyang #2 Hepatitis Hospital pharmacist preparing medicine to dispense

It is hard to describe how special it was to see patients again that we had seen before, but this time, we had life-saving medicine to give to them – and with it, hope. They came up to the reception desk a bit uncertain and read materials that we gave them on hepatitis B with great interest, as they patiently waited to see Dr. Alice Lee and other members of the team. After seeing her and signing a patient contract/consent form and receiving their prescription, they stopped in to the pharmacist's desk where their prescription was filled, and they took their first dose of medicine. As they passed the reception on their way out, with their medicine safely tucked away, many stopped to say thank you, and nearly all walked with a lighter step and smiles on their faces. Hope was evident and palpable.



A patient at Kaesong #2 Hepatitis Hospital receiving medicine for Hepatitis B

We were able to start 35 patients in Kaesong and another 38 patients in Pyongyang on treatment, including several who were very sick. Sadly, three patients who were supposed to start treatment in September died before they could receive their medicine. We expect to start another 200-300 patients on treatment in November. Please pray for these patients – that they will respond well to the medicine and will come to understand the love of Jesus for them and the living hope and healing He offers as we put our trust in Him.

Preparations for Harvest Underway and Chuseok Celebrated

In our travels south to Kaesong and back this time, the bright colors of fall were starting to appear. The corn harvest was underway in the southern part of the country, and in many places, open patches of ground were covered with corn in the process of being husked, shelled, and dried. Red peppers also filled open spaces, drying in the sun, in preparation for kimchee-making later in the fall. The roadsides were carpeted with cosmos blooming in various shades of pink and purple. Rice fields were beginning to turn from green to gold with the grain heads hanging heavy on the stalks.

September 15th marked Chuseok, the traditional lunar Mid-Autumn Festival day. In Pyongyang, thousands of families gathered on open patches of bare grass for a picnic. Photos and urns of loved ones who had died, were *(continued on page 4)*



Corn being husked and dried near Kaesong in early September

We Now Have Hope...

Dr. Alice Unah Lee, *Co-Founder Hepatitis B Free (Australia) and Director of the CFK Hepatitis B Project*

Somewhere in the world, one person dies every minute from hepatitis B related complications. Treatment with Tenofovir and Entecavir reduces risk of death after 5 years in those who are very sick from nearly 30% to about 5%. To say that this treatment is life-saving does not quite do it justice. It does much more than that; it brings health and hope for a future for the patients and those around them. For the doctors, they are empowered to heal – something that is so rare in North Korea. For many, it is the first real beyond-border connection, one without compromise, based on pure simple love and care for the people.

Growing up a little girl in Sydney, Australia, I wasn't sure of who I was. Having left Korea a little too young, growing up in a predominantly white society with all its associated challenges, life was less than perfect. My connection to Korea was a feeling in my heart, a longing for something, mixed with a dislike at that awkward, unlikeable face that looked back at me in the mirror. I needed to grow up to survive but for what purpose, I wasn't sure. It's funny how things have completely turned around and how I feel more connected to my people in a way that feels too close at times to their suffering.

I wanted to become a doctor to help people; I wanted to go to Africa (which I have yet to do). This romantic idea of medicine was replaced by the daily rigour of survival. Everything was a mad rush, I paced my life to get somewhere, not quite sure where it was I was going, but now I know. I needed to get to this place in my life where I could do this. It felt like I made no real active choices in my career. The path was laid before me, and all I had to do was keep walking. Thinking back now, all of it is so amazing, so miraculous – every bit of it! God must have been having a bit of a giggle watching this unfold. The miracle of my connection with CFK is alive every day, and through this, we were able to deliver the first round of treatment to the

sickest of patients living with hepatitis B.

“We now have hope” met us everywhere we went. Until now, no treatment for hepatitis B has been available in North Korea. I was so taken aback when the request for antiviral therapy was put forward again and again from my very first trip with Heidi in March 2014. What a crazy request, what were they thinking? Who do they think I am? These were clinics with no water, no power, nothing. The labs were archaic, the patients were sick, the doctors were isolated, and there was no money, sanctions up to the hilt, and no real time in country. It was too ridiculous.

We tried to screen and vaccinate, but the fear of knowing that they may already have hepatitis – for which nothing could be done – kept most people away. Then a sick little boy at a hepatitis hospital – the same age as my own son – caught my attention. It was no longer acceptable to me that this boy

had no future, and something had to be done. So this is how it started, the program for treatment, at the bedside of a very sick young boy. I still pray



for him and hope that his suffering is somehow lessened by the power he had. The journey from then has been one of setbacks and frustrations, of visa issues in China, sickness in country, tears and frustrations, terrified at what we had unleashed, and the possibility of failure.

But this was an extraordinary trip. For the first time, we giggled and laughed with patients. The sun was out, and the weather was still warm, mirroring our hearts. We congratulated those that received therapy and delighted in their joy. The first woman we started on treatment in Kaesong has a young toddler at home. She was diagnosed with very advanced liver disease soon after delivery. She and her family had been waiting for the expected sad ending. This woman was barely able to manage the basics of life and spent much of her time resting – her mother and father caring for her – hoping to buy her time. She was not expected to survive until now. After receiving medicine, she could not stop smiling, it was contagious. Her fate remains unknown, but what we do know is that she now has a real chance to see her daughter grow up, a chance to take her to her first day of school.

As we readied to pack for our journey back to Pyongyang, there was one more patient to attend to. She was an inpatient. This woman was unconscious and had *(continued)*



A hepatitis B patient sharing her story with Dr. Alice Lee

been in the hospital for nearly a week. I walked up the same path to the familiar place where I had seen the young boy just over two ago, dreading what lay ahead. Death and suffering is part of my world every day. But here, even in the most fundamental of life experiences, those in North Korea seem to do it so much harder. The patient was younger than me, her body unresponsive, swollen, and bruised lying on the floor. She was barely arousable. Crouched in the corner was her husband, hardly noticeable but for the pain that surrounded him. For her, I think that it is all too late. I could only say, "I'm sorry." He responded, "She has been waiting and waiting. She has been so sick, but still, she waited for your promise of medicines."

I repeated, "I am so sorry. I'm not sure it would make any difference." We left the medicines for her with no expectations. This was all we could do; the least we could do. Since then, Heidi has been told that the same woman is awake and improving. I pray for another miracle – that we will see her again.

It is impossible to describe the challenges that we face in our work, but what I gain in return is so much more. I witness the care and dedication of the local doctors, the love and patience for those in their charge. They are advocates and speak for them and want their patients on treatment. The hunger for knowledge; I cannot imagine what it must be like to be in their shoes. I admire them very much.

Our clinic in Pyongyang went smoothly, we had so many sick but happy patients – incongruous but true. As we packed up to leave, a local physician came looking for me, and with our forearms around each other, just like kids, giggling at what we had done, she leads me to show me something. Since our last visit in May, they had built us a brand new toilet! It had a flush (not yet working) but it was built for us (we have never had a toilet built for us). There were strict instructions that I was to use it, and I did just what I was told. It was built with love, and it was their gift to us. It has to be the best present I have ever received. We giggled a whole lot more, like two little girlfriends.

Sitting back at home, safe and surrounded by all of the luxuries of life, I think it must have all been a dream. But then I am drawn back by what needs to be done, and Heidi's emails pop up making me refocus and bringing me back to the work ahead. I am grateful for the chance, amazed at the wonderful generosity of many people that support and love us, the miracle of this and the love of God. This has been a journey of incredible faith, but this is only just the beginning.

(continued from page 2) laid out in remembrance, and throngs of people were out and about to mark the holiday.

Hope Against a Backdrop of High Tension and Flood Disaster

On the day I was returning from collecting blood from patients for baseline testing at the lab in Kaesong, our return trip to Pyongyang was delayed by a long detour onto really rough roads that we were forced to make, due to "road construction" that closed the main road leading from Kaesong to Pyongyang. Only later did we realize that this detour was caused by preparations being made for a ballistic missile launch that took place from this highway on September 5th.

Later in the week, North Korea's fifth nuclear test was followed by reports of a B-1 escorted bomber flyover within 40 km of the border area. All these events provided stark reminders of the simmering tensions between North Korea and her neighbors. We then began hearing about the flooding disaster that had struck the northern regions of North Korea between August 30th and September 4th, killing at least 133 people, with 400 still unaccounted for more than two weeks after the disaster. The latest reports indicate that well over 70,000 people have been displaced due to the flooding. Recovery and reconstruction efforts are now in a race against time, as winter temperatures are expected to return to this mountainous and northernmost region by late October. The North Korean government has reportedly suspended major building construction projects in Pyongyang in order to shift manpower and resources to the flood damaged area.

For the first time, the North Korean government has also appealed to the general North Korean public to help the northern areas and also appealed to UN agencies, friendly governments, and NGOs for urgent help.

After checking with donor partners and receiving confirmation from the DPRK government that any flood relief provided could be monitored to be sure that it reaches intended beneficiaries, we authorized the *(continued on page 6)*



Local children. Over 100,000 people are estimated to have been displaced by the floods, including many children. [Photograph]. UNICEF. <https://blogs.unicef.org/east-asia-pacific/unicef-supporting-children-affected-floods-dpr-korea/>. Sahin, Murat (Photographer). (2016). Used with permission.

Reflecting on the Successes

by Rob Robinson

Heading into this trip, I must admit I felt something of what Gideon must have felt as the Lord kept saying that he had too many men to fight the battle before him. We had selected seven people to work on a hepatitis lab at a hospital in the city of Kaesong. First, one man indicated that he just could not make the trip, then the trip dates were changed, which knocked one or two more men off the list. We left on the trip with four men landing in Beijing, and a fifth that was to catch up with us later to lay some flooring. When we went to get the visas, one of the four had not been approved due to a communication error, and it was discovered later that the man coming to install the flooring also had not been approved.

On August 30th we headed into Korea with three men, two of whom had not done much construction, to remodel a building into a working lab. Two days later, we headed down to the city of Kaesong. After a few days, for personal reasons, one of the three returned to Pyongyang and stayed there helping out the remainder of the trip, leaving me and my old high school mate, Tom Linton, to perform the work.



Tom and Rob troubleshooting the battery/inverter array at the Pyongyang #2 Hepatitis Hospital

But the local people were eager to help and learn. They had never seen an electrical system like the one we were installing, nor some of the tools that we brought to work with, but jumped in and helped as they could. Concrete walls had to be chiseled out to accept electrical boxes and conduit to carry the wires. We had to erect and assemble a large metal frame to hold the solar panels, which charged a bank of batteries with an inverter, and a distribution center containing breakers and a transfer switch.

While we did some of the more technical work, the local workers installed tile, windows, doors, and insulation. On



Rob discussing the Kaesong #2 Hepatitis Hospital lab project with MoPH and local staff

the last day, we installed the grid for the ceiling panels, so they could see how it went together and install the rest themselves. We left with the batteries charged, the inverter putting out 220 volts, and one room with working outlets.

Given the conditions and the lack of needed help, we are thanking God for His mercy and the amount of work that He allowed us to do. More than that, I was able to witness, first hand, some of the first 35 hepatitis patients in that country leaving with lifesaving drugs in their hands and smiles on their faces. I saw workers and a hospital director warm up to us, as we worked side by side discussing technique and creating the beginnings of a new lab that they never thought possible. The people showed their appreciation by supplementing our lunch every day and supplying some fruit, cookies, and hot water on most days. But on one holiday, they supplied a whole roasted duck, some local kimchee, and other garnishes. We left with smiles, handshakes, and a promise to return in November.

The next two days back in Pyongyang, Tom worked at the National TB Reference Lab with lab ventilation specialist, Bill Palmer, who was working on the bio-safety cabinets, so the doctors could handle live TB samples safely. I worked at the Pyongyang City Hepatitis Hospital managing to get a refrigeration system working that was giving us some trouble and also worked on several other issues to get their new lab up and running.

Working in Korea always has its challenges, but I have to look back on this trip as one with several great successes. Please continue to pray with us that God will use us to open people's eyes to him.

(continued from page 4) release of pre-positioned goods in our Pyongyang warehouse, including disaster relief hygiene kits and water filter buckets, along with canned meat, blankets, hand sanitizer, clothing, doctor's kits, bandaging supplies, patient mats, and other goods for immediate delivery to six TB and hepatitis care centers located in the flood-affected areas.

Our North Korean counterparts expect to accompany the shipment to the flood-affected communities before the end of September, and we are planning a monitoring visit to this area in late October. We are grateful that we were able to respond immediately. We expect that there will be an urgent need to send greenhouses and other support to these areas as quickly as possible, since the unharvested agricultural fields were inundated by flood waters, and many household food stocks and small animals were lost in the flooding, along with basic shelter and household goods. This region has always been one of the poorest regions, with malnutrition rates in children alarmingly high. Please be in prayer for relief and recovery efforts and for those who have been caught up in this disaster. This region is very mountainous, and more than 60 bridges



A badly damaged residential area in Hoeryong City, DPR Korea, following devastating floods in the north of the country. [Photograph]. UNICEF <https://blogs.unicef.org/east-asia-pacific/unicef-supporting-children-affected-floods-dpr-korea/>. Sahin, Murat (Photographer). (2016). Used with permission.

were washed out in the flooding. As late as two weeks after the flooding, there were reportedly still many communities that had not yet been reached to assess damage.

We fully expect that our flood confirming visit, planned for October, will reveal overwhelming need. Please consider giving as generously as you can to help us help the TB and hepatitis care centers in these regions that we expect will need to care for many patients affected by the disaster and aftermath.

Late October/November Visit Planned

Looking ahead to November, we expect to return to the DPRK for our usual year-end confirming visit to TB and hepatitis care centers. We are planning several other activities including completing the Kaesong #2 Hepatitis Hospital Lab renovations (flooring, cabinets, countertops, and overhead lighting); starting 200-300 more patients on hepatitis B therapy, including doing baseline blood analysis; evaluating 50-100 new patients for future enrollment in the Hepatitis B project; and continuing technical assistance at the National TB Reference Lab. We also expect a small team to visit the northern areas in late October to confirm the arrival/distribution of emergency flood relief being delivered prior to the end of September to needy care centers.

As we prepare to close out our work for 2016 in the DPRK, we remain ever grateful for your faithful prayers and financial support that undergirds these efforts and makes this work possible. We are extremely grateful for the many volunteers who share their time and talents and make it possible for us to accomplish such wide-ranging work for the glory of God. The doors for continued work are opening even further, despite the ongoing and tremendous sensitivities and hurdles.

Now more than ever before, we need your faithful prayers and financial support to be able to respond quickly, effectively, and carefully to the needs that open. Please pray that we will all be faithful to God and persevere. We give thanks that the God we serve fills and strengthens us with His love and hope.



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