

## Getting to Know the Igorots – A Medical Mission

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In 1997 I was in Sagada, Mountain Province in the Philippines when there was a call for volunteers to go on a medical mission to several underdeveloped areas of the Cordillera. I volunteered since it was only for a few days anyway and in doing so I drew a community called Tulgao (tool-g-ow) in Kalinga province. What an experience.



We were transported by a jeepney to the base of a mountain where an armed guard joined us. It seems there had been a tribal war just a few months earlier so we were being protected just in case. It also turned out as we later learned, that these people took a head only ten years earlier too. While that won't happen again how can one be sure?

Eventually we found ourselves at the top of a

desolate mountain with not a single sign of life to be seen anywhere. The village turned out to be on the other side of the mountain eight hundred metres lower. We had to hike all the way there and when we arrived we were a hundred fifty metres below the town necessitating another arduous climb. I wondered if I was actually going to make it at all.

There were four issues that we found – nutrition, worms, hygiene and worn out bodies. We also had a dentist along but the dentist only pulled teeth. This was the first mission and with no electricity to work a drill, it is impossible to create or replace a filling. Interestingly many who came to the dentist had teeth missing already. Apparently they simply pulled them out themselves with a pair of pliers.



The issues were depressing.

Nutrition could be solved by growing some greens in the fields. But then the fields are for rice, not greens, and they have been for centuries, why should anyone change that fact of life? Worms was a simple problem too, all they had to do was cage their pigs and the worm cycle would be broken but again the pigs have been left to run free for centuries so why should that change now?



The hygiene was simply that water was too precious and was needed for the fields instead of being wasted on washing. This region was particularly dry water wise so that was a reasonable position though in fact there was a river they could have used. We were able to bring some relief to these people but we couldn't cure anything because that needed a major cultural shift that we were unable to foster with the elders.

The worn out bodies were the most depressing issue and one we couldn't deal with at all. The average family was six kids and the average infant mortality was six kids so every woman starting at age fourteen produced at least twelve children. That alone was making them age prematurely. Many came to us nursing, pregnant, and towing a bunch of little ones along behind. In addition the women raised the kids, kept the house and worked the fields. The men did all the hard labour. You couldn't tell them to take it easy, if no one worked the fields they would starve. You couldn't tell them to have fewer kids, they needed the kids for labour or starve. So they died young from too much labour. No one who came to us was over sixty.

Should you ever go to Tulgao (there's a road there now so you don't have to hike the mountain) you may find a few little boys running about called Claus or Agpad since I use both names in the mountains. No they aren't my kids. These people were poor but felt none the less that they had to compensate us somehow. So they asked that we provide them our names on a piece of paper with the intent of naming some of their kids after us. I thought that was a really nice touch though I guess there will still be visitors in time who will wonder how those kids got their names.



The people in Tulgau lived in wooden huts with thatched roofs. Just walking to each home was potentially dangerous as you negotiated a trail that was not very stable. The diet was always the same, rice and beans with the odd snail sometimes and/or a periodic bit of pork when a celebration caused a pig to be killed. They live to work the fields and they die young. I have never in my life seen such a destitute group of people. However in the midst of all that destitution I did note one very intriguing thing. These people were happy and they seemed fulfilled. It makes you wonder sometimes what the problem is with us who have so much in comparison and complain about being unhappy all the time. .