



A FUN APPENDECTOMY!

In Thailand, I've grown accustomed to the occasional uncomfortable stomach. The food is spicy, the flavors are different, and many ingredients are foreign to my digestive system. That's why I wasn't surprised that the first day back from Christmas break, I didn't have much of an appetite at lunch. However, by the time 2am rolled around early Tuesday morning, my lack of appetite had morphed to a general achiness and then further to a specific sharp pain in my lower right abdomen. A quick trip to WebMD stoked my fears, so at 3am, I decided to go to the emergency room. I left with a backpack full of school clothes because I did not anticipate being there long.

There are two main hospitals in Surat. There is the Surat Thani Hospital, situated on Srivijay Rd. on the way to Central Plaza when you're headed out of town. I've known plenty of people that have gone there for various kinds of treatment, including many Westerners, but the underlying advice in town is to avoid it if you can. That is because Thaksin Hospital, located much more conveniently on Talad Mai Rd. next to Thida, is considered to be much better. With the increase in quality comes the increase in price as well. The good news (as an American), is that healthcare in Thailand is cheaper than in the US by orders of magnitude. As I drove my motorbike over the bridge, I quickly weight the cost against the worse case scenario. It was an easy decision to just go to Thaksin with their superior care.

I pulled up into the parking lot at Thaksin Hospital and parked, lightly clutching my stomach. It wasn't very painful, but it was noticeable. As I entered the Emergency Room, I realized I left my hospital ID card and passport at home. My footsteps must've roused the hospital workers from their slumbers because I noticed that there was not a single other patient or potential patient in there. I'd been to the ER in the middle of the night often enough (unfortunately) to know this was an interesting anomaly. My missing ID card didn't matter, as the bleary-eyed receptionist punched in my name and my passport number, which I have memorized, into the computer system. I was guided into the ER and given a bed to lie down on.

The nurses took my temperature and blood pressure, and asked the routine questions they were trained to ask - "Are you allergic to any medicine?" and "Do you have insurance?" I answered "no" to both and laid on the bed in discomfort. A young and friendly doctor came around. He looked fresh out of medical school and his hair was a bit disheveled as well. Maybe he had also been sleeping? He asked me some questions, and seemed to have made a diagnosis as I winced when he pressed down on the sore spot of my stomach. He ordered a blood and urine test to support his diagnosis.

I woke up as I heard the doctor shuffling towards me, with a funny look on his face.

“The results say you have appendicitis,” he told me with this half laugh that indicated the typical Thai aversion to awkward moments. I didn’t return the smile. I thought about how I never had been cut into, and that it wasn’t something I was looking forward to. “Don’t worry, though. We will do an abdominal ultrasound at 8:30am. Until then, there’s nothing to worry about.”

I was soon admitted into the hospital, and brought to my room in a wheelchair. Two hours later I was back in the same room, however this time I had a positive identification of an inflamed appendix thanks to the ultrasound. I had found out about the cost, and while burdensome, was manageable. My head was swimming with anxiety from the idea of being operated on. I couldn’t get in touch with my parents, though I did tell the managers and my sister.

The surgeon came into my room and approached the bed to tell me about the procedure. He was confident and spoke English well. Immediately, I was soothed by his calm and confident demeanor, even though he told me that I would be in the Operating Room within an hour. At this point, I felt relief to go along with the sharp pain in my belly. Relief, because there was an official diagnosis and I knew that after a fun bout with general anesthesia, I would be on the road to recovery.

The surgeon met me with a team of attendants and a mobile bed. I crawled onto the other bed, making sure my hospital-provided “skirt” didn’t fall off, and watched with amazement as the lights on the ceiling glided by just the same way they do in TV shows. I arrived at the OR, moved beds again, and with astonishing speed and efficiency, three or four nurses and technicians had me attached to a variety of machines with a mask over my face. My last thought was that I hope I fall asleep soon.



A panoramic shot of the emergency room entrance of Thaksin Hospital, Surat Thani.

Hopefully you never become familiar with it.

Waking up took a very long time. I remember being in a recovery area along with some other Thai people. We were all lying on beds in various states of consciousness. Coming out of anesthesia is a funny thing, as some people can attest to. I was asking my neighbors if they were ok, and that I hope they feel better soon. The druggy haze not only made me sociable, but seemingly eliminated all language barriers. I tried asking the nurses if I was OK. I also remember asking for my appendix back - maybe I could feed it to a stray dog. I was overcome with a sense of satisfaction for that brilliant and compassionate idea - brilliant and compassionate only in my anesthesia-addled brain.



The best part of the whole experience was the support from my friends and colleagues. The Thai teachers were very supportive, and even after a couple years in Thailand, this helped teach me new things about Thai people. Teacher Neung, my Thai teacher from last year, was on the verge of asking for a pillow to sleep on the sofa in my room when she found out I was going to depend on the nurses to take care of me during the night instead of any visitors. I had to very gently assure her that I would be OK with the hospital staff taking care of me, as much as I appreciated the offer. I learned that the Thai people thought it strange that I didn't have a slumber party in my hospital room.

It was also funny when my current MEP Thai teacher, Teacher Ohrn, came to visit and took a picture with me that she promptly posted to Facebook. I never thought to do that, but it was a great idea if you wanted a constant stream of visitors, which I did not mind at all.

There were visits from Super English people and Thai teachers and friends both Thai and foreign. The best, though, were the two visits from my students. Fahsai brought me cards from all the students, as well as a beautiful orchid. Bam visited with her brother and brought all kinds of goodies.

Speaking of goodies... I received so much soy milk and fruit and candy and snacks. The sheer weight of the gifts almost made my stitches pop out. I felt so spoiled... I almost didn't want to leave. Never did I imagine that the net experience of an appendectomy would be a positive one, but here in Surat, it definitely was.

