Interview with Thijs on his trip to Rwanda

***How did you experience the journey in general?***

It was the first time I visited a sub-Saharan country and it was a great experience. I didn’t know what to expect of Rwanda. I heard that they call it “The Switzerland of Africa”, a place of peace and safety within the turbulent African continent. I found it difficult to imagine this, but some friends confirmed this: even for a woman it’s safe to walk in Kigali at night! It made me very curious!

So, on the 30th of December I started my journey at Schiphol and after a 20 hour trip I arrived in Kigali. I walked out of the airport to search for the cab I requested for at the hostel, but it wasn’t there. Luckily it was a quite modern airport with free WIFI! So I was able to arrange a cab via our project coordinator. Later it appeared that there was no electricity for already 3 days, so phones and laptops were not working at all. Then you realize you’re in Rwanda!

After Anke arrived in the late afternoon we prepared ourselves for our first New Year’s Eve (NYE) in Rwanda. This night is much less popular than in the Netherlands, but we joined some other hostel guests and had a great evening. Some weeks in advance we already bought tickets for the Kigali New Year’s Eve Party, a rooftop party in the highest (and only) tower in Kigali. After midnight we took our first moto(rbike) to the tower where we met some friendly guards who told us that there was no party in that place… Maybe not the best idea to buy an electronic ticket for a party in Rwanda ;). A bit disappointed we went to another place to join the guys from the hostel. After some nice Rwandan beers and learning some African dances it was a great NYE in Kigali!

During the rest of the journey I especially enjoyed the landscapes, it’s with a good reason they call it the land of the 1000 hills. It was great that we were able to combine the project with seeing a lot of the country. We visited the Volcanoes National Park, Nyungwe Forsest NP and Akagera NP. Three beautiful national parks and every one of them showed us a totally different Rwanda!

And then the food…it varies less than the landscape… The most common way of having lunch or dinner is a typically Rwandan buffet. It consists of some rice, potato, mashed potato, fries, beans, mashed plantains, often just one type of vegetables and a piece of meat. The composition of the buffet was everywhere the same, so it became a bit boring after a while, but I have to admit that this highly carbohydrate rich food could be really tasty in some places!

What did impress me, was the healthcare system. Most Rwandans have a healthcare insurance and most of them have an insurance card with a chip. In this way the pharmacy was able to scan the card to check your insurance and even sent the declaration to the insurance via the internet! When I was travelling through the country I saw that the government has invested a lot in health care: even after driving for more than one hour on a dirt road you could find a big health center with different experts including a pharmacist.

***Can you give a global description of your daily activities during the three weeks?***

In the first week we visited Kipharma and Unipharma, a pharmacy and wholesale in Kigali. Those two organizations are together in the same building in the center of Kigali. Richard is the pharmacist in charge of the community pharmacy Unipharma. During this week he and his colleagues showed us all the different departments. All of them were very happy to guide us and enthusiastic about their jobs. Interesting is that pharmacies do have software that is able to manage stocks, make invoices, acquire patient data from the insurance, but a patient profile is not there. So for example checking interactions only happens in case the pharmacist asks the patient which drugs he/she uses and then the pharmacist can check for it manually. This takes a lot of time, so my impression was that this does not happen very often and so there is enough space for improvement.

The second part of the internship was the hospital in Kibogora, a rural hospital located on the shores of Lake Kivu. It is a hospital with 270 beds and serves a population of approximately 250,000 people. I did not expect a hospital this size in a rural area, especially because they had facilities like an X-ray and a well-equipped laboratory! The pharmacy had two locations in the hospital: one for inpatients and one for outpatients. The only pharmacist was actually just managing stocks and helping his assistants because the pharmacy was understaffed: only 1 assistant in each pharmacy. We proposed to close one pharmacy, so there would be 2 assistants in one pharmacy. Thereby they would be able to check each other before dispensing the drugs: safety first!

After Kibogora we went to Huye to visit the Pharmacy faculty at the University of Rwanda. We attended some lectures and were guided through the university, the campus and town. At the end of our stay we gave a lecture ourselves. As we were able to compare pharmacy practice from the Netherlands and students also having questions about pharmacy practice in the Netherlands we decided to give a lecture about the differences. We showed them that we do many different checks in the Netherlands before we dispense a drug in the Netherlands, to ensure safety. The students were very enthusiastic and I enjoyed the discussions afterwards!

Since visiting the Ruhango Hospital was unfortunately not part of this project anymore, we were thinking of visiting a referral hospital. We thought that it would be interesting to see the difference between a district hospital (Kibogora) and a more specialized one. The University Teaching Hospital of Kigali was very happy to welcome us. One of the pharmacists first told us about the hospital and then the pharmacy interns showed us around. It was a nice experience and the pharmacy was not only focused on stock managing like in Kibogora, but there were also pharmacists working in the wards.

***What were your nicest experiences?***

As I already mentioned, I really liked the interaction with the students in Huye. It is nice to talk with them as they are full of ideas and really motivated to improve the pharmaceutical care. At this moment I think they learn a lot in university, but they are not yet able to fully bring it into practice. For example because of the lack of software to support them, like software that has the ability to track patient profiles and to check for interactions.

Rwanda surprised me. An African country that developed really fast and that puts a lot of effort in making the healthcare better and better. All over Rwanda you can find well maintained health centers and for example the tests and medication for HIV/Aids are offered for free. They made big steps since the genocide, also because the Rwandans are really motivated. This makes that Rwanda is in my opinion a good place to invest money and knowledge!

***What were your less pleasant experiences*?**

There were some things I was surprised about. For example, in none of the pharmacies the assistants checked each other. From the view of safety it should be something (easy) to improve. We also proposed to (temporary) close one of the two pharmacies in Kigobora to have 2 assistants in one place, so they would be able to check each other before dispensing the drug. This is an easy, cheap and fast method to improve medication safety, but the pharmacist didn’t want to close a pharmacy because it’s part of the service he likes to offer. I was a bit disappointed about the way of prioritizing. On the other hand we were there for only 3 days and I think more time is needed for more research to be able to clarify the way they work, as they do it this way already for many years.

I was also surprised about the fact that a pharmacist is mainly focused on stock managing. During their pharmacy studies they also learn about pharmacotherapy and analytical methods, while it could be valuable if they would use it more in practice. On the other hand stock managing in Rwanda is more difficult because not everything is as easily available as in the Netherlands.

***If you could take this trip again, what would you have done differently?***

I think it would have been really valuable if we would have spent more time with the students in Huye. I think we can learn a lot from each other and in future perspective it would be good to get to know some same aged colleagues to work together with! At this moment the program was more focused on observing pharmacy practice in Rwanda. It would be nice to have some more discussions with the students about what the role of Farmacie Mondiaal could be in improving pharmaceutical care. They have experience in the field and together we could make a list of ideas for the future!