

Published: Friday, November 11, 2011

From Beijing to the Sea: One Midshipman's Challenge *By Midshipman 1st Class Chris Wehner*
Special to Trident

Midshipman 1st Class Chris Wehner is spending this semester in China. Here, he talks about his recent experience distributing diabetes information across China for Project Hope, a nonprofit organization that provides health care and humanitarian aid around the world:

This weekend I ran 100 miles from Beijing to the sea.

I had three goals for this trip: to see a cross-section of China, especially the rural area and coastline, to distribute educational information about diabetes for my internship at Project Hope, and to interview people about environmental and health issues for a documentary for my history class.

Along with two friends on collapsible bikes, I started out at 6 a.m. Friday morning. Most of the Chinese people we met told us that we were the first foreigners to ever come through their village, and most of them claimed there weren't any environmental or health problems in the country, even while they smoked cigarettes and burned trash on the river side.

As we came into Baodi, the first town where we were going to stay for the night, our group was having some difficulties. We were not sure if we were physically capable of continuing the next morning, but decided to take the evening to decide. Once in the hotel, we noticed a huge commotion outside. There were hundreds of people doing Taiqi, a Chinese martial art, with swords.

I started handing out the diabetes educational handouts, but there were so many elderly people that wanted them that I had a hard time distributing them in order. We had 49 people gathered around the three of us, and we recorded several of them talking about some of the issues in the country side.

Everyone has medical insurance now and that the quality of life has been improving, they said. One of the men I talked to said that he thought most Americans developed diabetes because of fast food but Chinese people were more prone to developing it due to lack of physical exercise and smoking. I also stopped by a pharmacy and interviewed the people working there about western and Chinese medicine.

We decided to move our starting point down the road 16 miles the next day because we would only have so much daylight and we would be at least 20 miles away from a hospital on either side. Making this decision was what really tested our group's flexibility and my leadership. It made me realize that if I'm going to be an officer in a few months I need to be able to put our personal safety in front of our objectives.

From the starting point we covered another 32 miles. Along the way we talked to cotton farmers and took water samples from a fishing area and a factory run-off. We finally made it to the town of NingHe and checked in to our second hotel.

That night I went to the town hospital and distributed more diabetes information for Project Hope. One of the security guards escorted me to a one-on-one interview with one of the diabetes doctors. She said that diabetes leads to cardiovascular disease as well as many other problems. According to the World Health Organization cardiovascular disease is the biggest cause of death in China.

We woke up the third day and began the last 13 miles to the sea. I had to run the whole way on a pulled hamstring, and when one of the bike chains broke and we had to stop to repair it. One section of the road had so much grease and oil on it that we joked about greasing the bike wheel with oil from the road.

At the sea, we interviewed some of the fishermen about an oil spill last year, and they told us about the effect it has had on their lives and business. We also asked questions about the power plant and wind farms along the coastline.

We traded one of the bikes for a taxi ride to the town of TianJin, then took the bullet train at a 180 mph back to Beijing, covering three days worth of running in only half an hour. We had run across two provinces and five counties and covered 100 miles. We came back with four water samples and 23 interviews and 15 fewer diabetes educational packs.

It was one of the coolest experiences of the semester.

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