

Is There a Doctor in the House?

The other day, my worker was not feeling well and decided to go to the doctor. I dropped her off after work on my way to run an errand. The next day when she returned for work, she asked if I could help her purchase the medication. I was comfortable with that option but when she presented me with her list of medications, my jaw hit the floor.

There were 8 separate items listed! No matter how ill someone is, I have (personally) never known a doctor to prescribe 8 medications at one time for one illness. I asked her if she was



certain these were all for her and not for different people in the family. Nope. The doctor prescribed them all just for her. I asked her if some were to be taken later, Nope. The doctor prescribed them all to be taken/used at the same time. Yikes!

Let me interrupt this narrative to provide some cultural information about Congolese doctors. The average cost to visit a doctor is about 3500 francs, or about \$4. Sounds pretty cheap, right? Unfortunately, the average salary for a worker is around \$5 daily. So in USD terms, imagine you make \$7.50 an hour for 8 hours (one day of work) for a total of \$60. But the cost to visit a doctor must be paid up front at a total of \$48. That is a lot of money for someone to pay.

Therefore, if you were to visit a doctor, you wouldn't just go for something minor like a cold. You would go for something more serious. If you must spend 4/5 of your daily salary to "hire" someone, you expect some sort of return on your investment. And this is what will often happen - the Congolese doctors will prescribe a medication, even if it is useless just because people expect something out of the doctors. This very thing happened to me when I thought I was experiencing a miscarriage with Solomon. I was prescribed a medication for abdominal spasms which if taken, could have been dangerous. The doctor did not know what to prescribe in my circumstance (as far as I am aware, there is no "cure" for a miscarriage) so he wrote a prescription for something he thought would be a placebo. Luckily, I knew there was no cure and was hesitant to take the medication and contacted an American doctor who knew what was going on over the phone.

The other problem is a follow-up visit. Ideally, a doctor will prescribe you something and remind you that if you don't feel better in a few days, to please call back to schedule a follow-up visit. There is no such thing here. No one can afford to take 2 days off of work and pay out of pocket almost 2 full days' work in money. Thus, a doctor will often over-prescribe medication in an attempt to cover any and all problems eliminating need for a follow-up – a dangerous practice.

When my worker presented me with a list of 8 medications, I knew that she was over-prescribed but I could not determine which ones were "placebos" or "useless" and which ones were dangerous if mixed. So I called for back-up! I contacted two doctors, a nurse, and a translator/friend/missionary. A few hours later, we were able to go back to her root complaints and cross-reference the medications prescribed. Only one needed to be purchased. We substitutes 2 others with basic over-the-counter medications we brought with us. Had she taken all those medications, she would have felt worse from side effects than from the original illness. I am glad my worker trusted me enough to talk to me about what was going on, and I am so very blessed to know medical personal here that are willing to help.