Even as our plane descended into Beijing, the first thing I noticed was the air pollution. How could this city ever be ready for Olympic athletes trying to set world records? Many of the pictures I took ended up looking as though rain were falling. The camera’s flash reflected off particles in the air, just like it would reflect off a water droplet.

As I was to learn from officials in China’s Ministry of Health, pollution will almost certainly get worse before it gets better. In March, I was one of 45 School of Law students who traveled through China with the dean, faculty, and graduates for 10 days. The trip was coordinated by Professor Robert Percival, who taught on a William J. Fulbright Fellowship at the China University of Political Science & Law in Beijing during the spring semester. He and the law school arranged meetings for us with Chinese government officials, environmental and public health non-governmental organizations, international law firms and Chinese law students.

We visited typical tourist destinations, but it was experiences like a trip to a Cloisonné factory that stand out in my mind. Presented to us as a prime example of the Chinese government’s pride in their culture of industrialization, the experience was shocking. Our guide proudly showed us factory workers painting the copper pots with painstaking detail, sanding glaze and operating open-flame kilns without protective masks, eye protection, or adequate light. The worker conditions would have been flagrant violations of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in the U.S.

On our final day in Beijing, those of us interested in health law visited the Chinese Ministry of Health. Officials presented an overview of the Chinese health care system and graciously answered our probing questions. I was most surprised by the answer to my question about what the Ministry is doing to address the relationship between the quality of the natural environment and public health. Perhaps some of the message was lost in translation, but the officials responded that the Ministry of Health only addresses indoor environmental issues. This candid answer highlighted a very different outlook on addressing public health issues that result from poor environmental conditions.

At the end of the trip, I felt a sense of moral and economic responsibility that we, as global citizens, need to strengthen our relationships with international contacts, particularly in the fields of environmental and public health. Cleaning up the environment is a global endeavor that will, in turn, improve public health worldwide. The trip renewed my belief in the importance of international travel. There is so much we can learn from one another. And we cannot accomplish our environmental goals independently.

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