

# Many Hands Reaching Out

By S Surenteran

Community service has always taken centre stage in the lives of medical students at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM). In recent years, the advent of Overseas Community Involvement Projects (OCIPs) has taken the faculty by storm. An unprecedented number of voluntary student groups devote their time and efforts tirelessly to various causes and communities. These projects take place one to two times a year across Southeast Asia, reaching Cambodia, Thailand, and more recently, Myanmar.

Most of these projects provide primary healthcare in the form of screenings conducted by doctors and facilitated by enthusiastic medical students. Health education also features strongly in every of these expeditions. We are called to action when we begin to understand that the healthcare systems in some countries fail to deliver even a fraction of what is needed to marginalised towns and societies. Yet we also understand the limitations of our ability to effect change on a large scale and are realistic about what we, as mere medical students in a completely foreign land, can achieve for our beneficiaries. As such, our greatest desire is to supplement local primary healthcare services already available. We work towards this by actively engaging local partners and organisations, some of which are religious in nature. Despite this, all our projects remain secular, focusing on helping the communities medically and socially.

These projects were initiated at different points in time, and one project already has a seven-year history! But no matter the length of its history, each project has developed a clear structure and strong culture. Mentorship features strongly, with seniors guiding juniors, maintaining a strong sense of continuity. Project alumni, be they students or

doctors, lend their expertise and experience by sharing their ideas, as well as contributing time and money.

Accountability is enhanced because the National University of Singapore (NUS) Medical Society manages all these projects. Continued support is available for these OCIPs, and programmes and budgets are reviewed constantly. In a bid to raise the profile of these projects, we have finally managed to garner the support of experienced videographers and filmmakers to produce short films on some of these projects! Data collection is also going to be introduced as an essential component of each project, as a means to gain deeper insight into the communities, and to track the progress of the team's efforts year-on-year.

Coordinating such overseas medical missions is certainly no mean feat for any organisation, let alone a group of medical students. The team has to plan for the entire trip, maintain close liaisons with local partners, raise sufficient funds to cover all their expenses, engage local translators and also secure accompanying doctors with the same vision. The propensity of young medical students to carry out all these good works is truly commendable.

Below are the details of the four OCIPs which will be going overseas this December to carry out their programmes and make a difference in the communities they are reaching out to. What is worth noting is that while each project does comprise of a medical aspect, there are also a number of non-medical long term goals that each is actively trying to accomplish. This is impressive because the medical students strongly recognise the importance of helping these communities in a holistic manner. Furthermore, it demonstrates the maturity in thought that these health problems are but manifestations of other fundamental social issues that underlie the communities that they serve.



NUS Medical Society





Dr Velda Han running a clinic during our community health screenings

## Project Battambang

By the Project Battambang team

### About us

Project Battambang is an overseas community project organised by students from YLLSoM. For the past two years, the team, mentored by Dr Ong Yew Jin, has been going to the district of Poipet, located near the Cambodian province of Battambang and on the Thai-Cambodian border. Our main focus is on improving the provision of healthcare and education through sustainable partnerships and support of local systems, and the empowerment of local youths to effect greater social change within their own community.

Aside from supplementing local primary healthcare services through community health screenings, the team also conducts household surveys shedding light on the needs of the community, as well as tailored health education programmes seeking to improve the health situation of underprivileged Cambodians. The team also supports the development of village schools and education of needy students in the area.

To ensure long term sustainability, the team works alongside two main local contacts: the Missionary Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and accompanying students from the Phnom Penh International Medical University. If you are interested in joining or supporting the project, or finding more about it, email Project Battambang at [med.battambang@gmail.com](mailto:med.battambang@gmail.com) or visit our website at <http://www.projectbattambang.com>.

### Recent updates

- Duration of upcoming trip: 11 - 23 December 2012
- Location: Poipet, Cambodia
- Team size: 24 medical students, eight doctors (four for each half of the trip)

The trip has been split into two halves:

- First half: 11 - 16 December
- Second half: 16 - 21 December, 22 - 23 December (R&R)

We are still looking for one more doctor to accompany us on the second half of the trip. Do drop us an email if you are interested in coming along! **SMA**

FROM THE HEART

## Project Lokun

By the Project Lokun team

### About us

Project Lokun is a biannual humanitarian project headed by medical students, where a team of students and doctors visit Cambodia to provide medical relief. Based in the Centre of Research of Agricultural Practices social services centre in Pursat province, it aims to reconnect villagers to the nation's healthcare system, as well as improve their health and living conditions. This is done via:

### Health education

We teach village primary schoolchildren simple things such as wound cleaning and personal hygiene through games and songs. A teachers' coursebook is also provided for teachers to refer to during lessons, and they are taught how to handle children with illnesses or fractures.

### House to house education

House visits are conducted in villages to track chronic illnesses via village mapping. Blessing bags containing essential health supplies are given to families, and they are taught simple health topics such as wound management.

### Clinics

Villagers come to obtain free medical checkups and medicine for simple illnesses. For more chronic or advanced conditions, they get referred out to local medical organisations. Medical students get to help out at various stations (eg, triage and pharmacy), work with doctors, and see interesting medical cases. Additionally, we also have:

- Kampong Luong: a floating village in the Tonle Sap river; it houses Vietnamese refugees who cannot step onto Cambodian soil as they are not Cambodian citizens. Clinics are set up in a floating church and floating health centre.
- Local doctor: we employ a local doctor who conducts free weekly clinics for the villagers in between our biannual trips. This is to ensure that there is proper follow-up and sustainability.

One for the cameras!





Aside from the above programmes, this year we are also looking into new initiatives such as:

### Children's health screenings

We plan to screen primary school children for malnutrition, hair lice, etc, and refer the serious cases to doctors. We also hope to contribute towards a feeding programme to help malnourished children.

### Pailin

This will be our pioneer trip to the Cambodian province of Pailin, and we are liaising with the Marist Brothers Education Centre. Present humanitarian efforts in Pailin require medical aid, hence we aim to provide clinic services, health education and screenings for the people there.

For more information regarding our project, please feel free to visit our official website at <http://www.projectlokun.com> or our Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/projectlokun>. You can also directly get in touch with our project leaders Chrisanda Lee at [chrisandalee@gmail.com](mailto:chrisandalee@gmail.com) (9138 7316) and Liu Biquan at [biquan263@gmail.com](mailto:biquan263@gmail.com) (9637 1440).

### Recent updates

- Duration of upcoming trip: 11 - 23 December 2012
- Location: Pursat and Pailin, Cambodia
- Team size: 27 medical students and 15 doctors (ten for the 1st half, five for the 2nd half)
- Fundraising target: \$16,000

The trip has been split into two halves:

- First half:
  - 14 December – clinics at two different locations in Kampung Luong
  - 15 December – clinics at two different villages
  - 16 December – clinics at two different villages
- Second half:
  - 18 December – central clinics in Pailin city
  - 19 December – central clinics in Pailin city

We are looking for doctors to accompany us for half or the full duration of the trip. Do drop us an email if you are interested in coming along! **SMA**

With the primary school children we taught health education to, through interactive means



Hmong villagers waiting for their turn to see the doctors

# Project Phetchabun

By the Project Phetchabun team

### About us

Project Phetchabun is a new biannual initiative by NUS Medical Society to Phetchabun, Thailand, in collaboration with RADION International, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Phetchabun. We first started out in June 2011 when we pursued an opening from HealthEx International to work with RADION.

The people whom we serve are members of the Hmong hill tribe that inhabits Phetchabun. They are a destitute community of 30,000, the majority of whom are Laotian refugees who escaped persecution by their government for supporting the US during the Vietnam War. Though they have lived in Phetchabun for a long time, they have not been granted Thai citizenship, and as such receive very little help from the Thai government in terms of healthcare, employment and education.

Our project has identified three main areas for intervention:

### Healthcare

The Hmong people lack access to proper healthcare, as they cannot afford to pay the doctors' fees, do not have citizenship cards and have little access to hospitals which are located far away from the mountaintops they inhabit. Most rely on witch doctors and traditional medicine.

### Education

Though the Hmong children attend public schools, many of the teachers allocated to the schools lack conviction and do not even teach the children.

### Social problems

Drug abuse is rampant in the area, with more than 50% of children using drugs since a very young age. Many start by sniffing glue, slowly progressing to the use of heroin. Rates of domestic violence and abuse of women are also devastatingly high in the patriarchal society of Phetchabun.



Running a clinic at Phetchabun

# Project Sa'Bai

By the Project Sa'Bai team

## About us

Project Sa'Bai is an annual overseas community project, organised by 32 first and second year medical students from YLLSoM. Now in its seventh year, our project has grown tremendously, and is now able to reach out to three schools and a village in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Due to high costs, the lack of health literacy and the lack of a health screening programme, healthcare in Cambodia is rather inaccessible to the villagers. Therefore, every year, Project Sa'Bai conducts free basic health screenings for about 1,400 schoolchildren from three Don Bosco schools in Phnom Penh as well as for Phum Chreh village, to treat acute conditions, as well as provide further intervention for chronically ill patients.

Project Sa'Bai also hopes to help gradually change its involvement from one of disease intervention to that of disease prevention. Health education is thus an important part of the project. Over the years, health literacy in the village and schools has improved visibly, through education initiatives aimed at teaching personal hygiene, good dietary habits as well as disease transmission. In addition, Project Sa'Bai aims to leave a sustainable impact on the health of the school- and village children by enhancing their diet with food rich in nutrients, and supplementing it with multivitamins.

This year, Project Sa'Bai looks to continue the work of previous years, by expanding the project to further cater

This coming December 2012, our initiatives include:

- **Clinics** to provide treatment, as well as **house visits** to bring healthcare to the non-ambulant
- **Basic first aid and disease identification training** for the local medical volunteers to equip them with skills to help their fellow villagers, as well as teach their fellow villagers
- **Women's health education:** we are currently working with the NUS nursing faculty to introduce healthcare education to women volunteers to equip them with the knowledge to cope with women's health problems and teach other women, as well as empower them
- **Drug abuse education:** we are collaborating with a psychologist specialising in addictions, to conduct a focus group discussion with the schoolchildren to find out their reasons for and severity of drug abuse, to come up with an appropriate education programme for the school
- **Hygiene education** to continue simple first aid and hygiene education for the public and schoolchildren, as well as the introduction of **dental care education**

At the end of five years, Project Phetchabun hopes to help the Hmong community achieve **medical and education self-sufficiency**. We are currently working with RADION to establish contact with local Hmong doctors and medical students from Chiang Mai University medical faculty, in the hope of bringing regular health services to the Hmong people in the near future.

## Recent updates

This December, eight medical students, three doctors and one psychologist will be going up to Phetchabun for ten days. We need to raise a total of \$14,000 for our medical clinics, school substance abuse and hygiene education programmes, as well as the village leaders' trainings. For more information, please visit our Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/nus.projectphetchabun> or email us at [projectphetchabun2012@gmail.com](mailto:projectphetchabun2012@gmail.com). You may also directly contact our project directors Teo Wei Shan at 9173 2111 and Shevaun Sethi at 9846 5949. The money will go a long way to helping the Hmong community, so please donate and support our cause! Thank you! **SMA**



Having fun with the children



to the needs of the Cambodian people. Plans for this year's project, from 7 to 21 December 2012, include:

- Provision of care for a newly identified village, Kompon Speug
- Improvement of water sanitation and hygiene in Kompon Speug and Phum Chreh villages
- Expansion of a spectacle-fitting programme to include all graduating students of the three Don Bosco schools
- Improvement of the health education syllabus and materials
- Continuation of an improved diet programme designed to provide schoolchildren with more nutritious and balanced meals
- Teaching of valuable healthcare skills that will be necessary and applicable at the Don Bosco schools (such as first aid and basic medication), to both the teachers and schoolchildren
- Implementation of a streamlined referral system for patients requiring further treatment (in both acute and chronic care), beyond that provided in our clinics
- Introduction of a population study in Phum Chreh village, with collection and subsequent analysis of data, to identify important trends and points of focus for future projects

### Recent updates

Project Sa'Bai recently held a fundraising event at KK Women and Children's Hospital (KKH) on 25 September, selling popular snacks such as Gong Cha bubble tea, Lao Ban soya beancurd and Ramle burgers. The event was a resounding success, with all items being sold out by 3 pm due to overwhelming demand, and the team managed to raise more than \$900 that day! We would like to thank KKH for allowing us to hold our event, Gong Cha, Lao Ban and Mr Ramle for providing the food, as well as everyone who made a purchase or donation, and supported us by "liking" our Facebook page.

Project Sa'Bai would also like to request for help from doctors for our upcoming trip in December 2012. Due to a manpower shortage and other unforeseeable circumstances, we are currently in need of doctors to help run our village clinic in Phum Chreh on 16 December 2012, as well as school clinics at Teuk Thla, Phum Chreh and Tuol Kork on 17 and 18 December 2012. We would also greatly appreciate any monetary donations or donations in kind (drugs), so as to provide a greater scope of care for our less privileged Cambodian counterparts. If you would like to help our project or find out more, please visit our Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/projectsabai> or contact our project heads, Soh Yu Da (9825 3479) and Nicola Koh (9178 5201) at [projectsabai2012@gmail.com](mailto:projectsabai2012@gmail.com). Your help will most definitely be appreciated! Thank you! **SMA**



Children from one of the Don Bosco schools waiting to get their health screenings done (Project Sa'Bai)

### Conclusion

Although the four projects are similar in many aspects, each one has its unique focus and long term objectives. It is indeed wonderful that through these projects, Singapore's future doctors are able to sharpen valuable skill sets such as leadership and management. More importantly, they arrive at a more profound understanding of what it means to serve diverse peoples and communities in our globalised world.

These meaningful OCIPs are nothing without the support of the local medical community. Every year, they encounter two main challenges – raising sufficient funds and securing doctors who can join the trips. As mentioned above, each project operates on a budget of approximately \$20,000 and requires the participation of six to eight doctors. Those two areas are where we appeal for the support of doctors and healthcare professionals. As students, we overflow with passion and are willing to give our all, but we cannot achieve our dreams without the essential participation of doctors nor the much needed funds.

If our causes resonate with you, and you are interested to make a donation or join a project, you can contact the project leaders directly. Alternatively, do drop us an email at [medicineocip@gmail.com](mailto:medicineocip@gmail.com). We will do our best to make the donation process hassle-free and attend to your queries within a day. Suggestions on how to improve our projects are most welcome. At the end of the day, our efforts may just be a drop in the ocean. But, aren't oceans made up of drops? **SMA**

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