

FROM THE HEART



project  sa bai



PROJECT SA'BAI: AN INITIATIVE UNLIKE ANY OTHER

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Sovan's story

In many ways, Sovan (pictured above) was just like any other child her age – except for the hole in her heart.

Diagnosed with ventricular septal defect from a young age, Sovan had been told by doctors that nothing could be done about her condition. She had lived in the shadow of her disease, in constant fear of sudden complications. While her friends were able to enjoy recreational sports, Sovan had no choice but to watch from the sidelines.

During our clinics in 2012, we chanced upon this sweet-looking 14-year-old girl. Hoping that something could be done to help Sovan, our doctors sent her X-rays back to Singapore for a proper review. Within a few months, she was flown to Singapore for repair surgery, which was performed pro bono.

The operation was a resounding success. Sovan has since returned to her village where she now lives happily as a healthy teenager.

Sovan is one of the many Cambodian children who have been served by Project Sa'Bai's annual clinics. Project Sa'Bai (meaning "happiness" in Khmer) is a student-run,

student-led medical initiative based in Cambodia. For the past ten years, Project Sa'Bai has been organising free medical clinics and pharmacies for villagers with unmet healthcare needs.

"I realise we have the potential to truly make a difference in the lives of the Cambodians. Even if we put in hours of work and end up helping just one single person, seeing a smile on the person's face at the end is simply worth it."

- Rachel Wang (Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine [YLLSoM] Class of 2018)

The work we do

Each year, Project Sa'Bai sees more than 2,000 Cambodian men, women and children at our clinics. What sets Project Sa'Bai apart from other medical missions is the wide range of healthcare services we offer.

Apart from general clinics, Project Sa'Bai has also established specialist clinics for dental, eye, ENT and women's health, so that we can better meet the diverse healthcare needs in Cambodia.

To this end, Project Sa'Bai strives to assemble a truly multidisciplinary team for our clinics. For our clinics held in Cambodia last December, our team comprised 35 medical students and 32 dental students, all from the National University of Singapore (NUS); 35 doctors and dentists (some of whom are Project Sa'Bai alumni); optometrists from AMIGOS Eye Care, USA; as well as Cambodian doctors and medical students from the University of Puthisastra, Cambodia.

Apart from disease intervention, Project Sa'Bai also recognises the importance of long-term disease prevention, as well as health education in raising the health and hygiene standards of the Cambodians. Health education is thus one of our major focuses, and is implemented through a fun and interactive health education syllabus for the schoolchildren. In 2014, Sa'Bai Medicine collaborated with Sa'Bai Dental and Sa'Bai Vision to produce a 100-page teachers' manual on first aid and basic healthcare, and a pictorial pamphlet to educate illiterate parents on the critical points of dental, food and basic hygiene, to better care for their children.

"At one of the houses, an elderly lady embraced me, told me how grateful she was for our project, and thanked us for teaching her grandchildren and giving medicine to her daughter who was ill."

- Sarah Fang (YLLSoM Class of 2018)

Making a difference

In recent years, we have successfully piloted several new programmes to improve the quality of our clinics. In 2013, we developed a biometrics system for patient registration, with the help of some computing students from Singapore Management University. Building upon the success of the system, the 2014 team further integrated the biometrics system into our clinics, and we are now able to keep proper patient records and trace our patients' prior consultations, referrals and prescriptions.

Another initiative, Sa'Bai-on-Wheels, allows us to see non-ambulatory patients and bring healthcare facilities to their doorsteps through our mobile clinics. Patients who require further medical attention are also able to take advantage of our referral system, which directs them to non-governmental organisations and local health clinics for subsidised treatment, where possible.

All these schemes are part of our constant goal to improve our healthcare delivery year-on-year and better serve our beneficiaries.

One of our greatest achievements to date is the success of our clean water programme in Phum Chreh village.

Population studies conducted in the early years of our project found that villagers kept water in open vats and did not boil it before consumption. This prompted us to install a water filtration system in the village, as well as educate the villagers about proper water treatment and storage.

Over the past ten years, there has been a steady decrease in the incidence of gastrointestinal diseases – a testament to the power of education in effecting long-lasting healthcare changes through mindset change and promotion of health-seeking behaviours.

Going forward

However, for any effort to be truly sustainable, it is important to inspire local activism. To start this process, the Sa'Bai Cambodian Wing was formed last year. Involving Cambodian doctors and medical students from the University of Puthisastra, it sets out to gradually expand Project Sa'Bai beyond a Singaporean-driven activity, into a local ground-up initiative.

As much as we serve, we also receive. Hundreds of medical students have been part of Project Sa'Bai since its beginning. Each individual adds a little to the project, and takes away lessons and memories to be kept for life.

Ultimately, Project Sa'Bai seeks to fulfil its namesake – to bring happiness and joy to the people we serve. ■

For more information, please refer to:

- Project Sa'Bai's official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/projectsabai>;
- Project Sa'Bai's official website: <http://www.projectsabai.com>;
- Or contact us at projectsabai@gmail.com.

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Yuan Jing (far left) and Lauren Fu are both Year 2 medical student at NUS YLLSoM. He enjoys hiking, cooking and swimming. She enjoys dancing, soccer, and spending time with family and friends.

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