

A Pharmacist in Cambodia

Sandra Tsai

In our most recent federal election, in November 2000, there was some discussion of the future of health care in Canada, including the possibility of a “two-tiered system” and its effect on universal access, a hallmark of the Canadian system. In 2001, our front cover features pictures to illustrate the stories of Canadians who have volunteered or worked in health care in other countries.

In a previous issue of *CJHP* I described my experience as a volunteer at Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1997.¹ Cambodia is one of the most medically neglected countries in the world. As dramatized in the movie “The Killing Fields”, Pol Pot, the leader of the notorious Khmer Rouge guerrilla army, ordered a genocide that eventually took approximately 2 million lives, one-seventh of the country’s population. Most of the people executed during his 3½-year reign were the educated, the skilled, former government workers, and those with foreign experience. It was reported that when the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979, only 4 doctors and 7 pharmacists had survived the mass murders.

A lack of education, medical care, government institutions, and social infrastructure were the result of 3 decades of social and political unrest. Poverty, malnutrition, poor education, and illness represent the cycle that the Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE is trying to break, by giving people access to reliable, free health care. Therefore, the goal of the hospital from its opening in December 1996 has been to provide a homegrown clinical training ground where Cambodian nationals can learn to meet these needs.



In 1997, Sandra Tsai travelled to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to volunteer her services in the pharmacy department of the newly established Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE. A crowd of 300 to 450 people gather there daily to receive free medical care. Pictured here are some patients coming out of the hospital. The front of the hospital also serves as a triage center, where vital signs are checked and recorded, and a brief diagnosis is made of each patient's state of health. The patients are then seen in 1 of the 9 outpatient stations or, for the most serious cases, are admitted to the medical ward.

When I was at the Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE in March 1997, the hospital had been in operation for only 4 months. At that time it served solely ambulatory patients, who would line up as early as dawn, some coming from distant provinces as word travelled about the free, high-quality, compassionate care provided at the hospital. The outpatient clinic was only open on weekdays from 7:30 AM to 4:30 PM. In the first quarter of 1997 more than 14 000 patients were treated, including over 5600 during the month I was there. The pharmacy staff consisted of a pharmacy manager from the Philippines and 4 Cambodian nationals, of whom 2 were pharmacists.

Since that time, the hospital has flourished. The outpatient facility has established specialty clinics for conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and HIV/AIDS, to improve patient care and to provide

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further medical training. Besides the outpatient clinic, there is an emergency department, from which the most serious cases can be admitted to the 11-bed medical ward. There are also 2 operating rooms and an 11-bed surgical ward. The services provided up to the 4-year mark of the hospital's existence have included 275 000 outpatient consultations, 2330 surgical operations, and 310 000 pharmacy prescriptions. I have also been encouraged by progress within the pharmacy itself. One of the Cambodian pharmacists whom I met in 1997, Mrs. Mom, is now one of the pharmacy managers, and another Cambodian pharmacist was hired in 1998.

The hospital's annual operating budget in 2000 was just over US\$2 million. It would easily cost 10 times that much to run a similar operation in some developed countries. The budget has been kept low through the support of individual donors and staff sponsors, the dedicated spirit of the medical staff, and the generous support of medical supply companies around the world, which contribute more than \$2 million in in-kind

donations to help make high-quality care and training available.

Further information about the Sihanouk Hospital Center of HOPE can be obtained at the Web site of HOPE *worldwide* (www.hopeww.org). This is just one of many organizations throughout the world that need our support to continue their invaluable work. The year 2001 is the International Year of Volunteers. I encourage those who can do so to donate your professional skills, financial resources to sponsor a health care professional in training, or goods in kind to help the less fortunate, both at home and abroad.

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References

1. Tsai S. A hospital pharmacy consultant in Cambodia. *Can J Hosp Pharm* 1998;51:225-6.

