VIETNAM
LAOS
CAMBODIA

MEDICAL &
SCIENTIFIC AID
NEWS BULLETIN

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THE TRAGIC LIFE OF BABY ASHER

MSAVLC has been supporting the Health and Wellness Project run by Daughters of Cambodia in Phnom Penh for the past ten years now. During our visits there we have listened to, and subsequently read, many harrowing stories told, both by the young women and men who have been rescued from the abominable sex trade in Cambodia, and by Ruth Elliot, Daughters' tenacious and inspiring founder and director. The story which follows, of Baby Asher, is perhaps the saddest.

Many of the young people who arrive at Daughters have medical conditions which are common to this despicable trade. Young girls, and sometimes boys, are tricked or sold into prostitution by their families, friends or acquaintances. They have little education, life experience or protection, and they are vulnerable to abuse, to sexually transmitted diseases and to becoming pregnant. Whilst the medical project which is funded by MSAVLC is a tremendous help to those who leave the sex trade and join Daughters, what follows is the story of one of the girls who was already pregnant when she arrived there.

On our visit to Phnom Penh we were taken by tuk-tuk to meet one of Daughter's clients who lived in a very poor part of the city. When we arrived we were informed that she was not there, although her baby, Asher, was.

Asher's mother had been infected with syphilis from her husband who was now in prison for drug-related offences. She had now taken up with a new boyfriend and had gone to Sihanoukville with him, none of the family knew why, or for how long.

The baby was left in care of the father's mother, and an aunt, who actually were kind and caring, but the baby was in a dreadful state.

Due to being infected with syphilis, Asher had developed hydrocephalus and his head was enormous; it had a sore on it which was weeping, and he was lying on the concrete floor on just a mat and a towel. The small garage-like room where they lived was open both to the polluted canal which ran outside, and the main road full of traffic and fumes. The small house was shared with the family which included ten other children.

Baby Asher was in a terrible state, dehydrated and emaciated, and he could hardly move because of his enormous head. We could see his ribs, his legs and arms were like sticks. It was a pitiful and heartbreaking scene.



They fed him every other day with a very small amount of bottled milk, but he could not take much at all, and he sucked on a dirty dummy. Apparently, ants would crawl on him and bite him and he would cry out in pain. His eyes would roll into his head and we thought that he was having some sort of seizure. He looked near to death. Ruth said that she would ask a paediatric doctor that she knew to visit him, we all felt that he should be in hospital.

Before returning to Britain we asked Ruth if we could buy Asher a cot and mattress. Furthermore, we asked her if she could arrange for Asher to be admitted to hospital. Unfortunately, the hospitals in Phnom Penh could do nothing for the poor child and the family were reluctant to take him to Vietnam to be treated there.

Daughters' medical staff did what they could for Asher to make him more comfortable, but sadly he passed away a few weeks after our visit. We do not know what became of his mother.

This story highlights not only the difficult conditions which the Daughters of Cambodia clients face, but also the tremendous difference that our funding to Daughters can make to these young people's lives.

Daughters of Cambodia's Health and Wellness Project provides vital health and support services needed to aid physical, psychological and social recovery of vulnerable girls and boys. To date they have helped 920 former sex workers experience freedom, health, social and psychological recovery.

THE WHEELCHAIRS WHICH CHANGE LIVES

For the past thirteen years MSAVLC has been providing wheelchairs to people in Vietnam who have been affected by chemical warfare. Up to the beginning of this year a total of 2,499 wheelchairs have been funded by the charity, purchased and distributed to victims by VAVA, the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/ Dioxin. In March this year the Trustees agreed to fund a further 400 wheelchairs at a cost of £33,500, and the money was sent to VAVA in May.

We hope to publish stories and photographs of some of the recipients of these wheelchairs in future Bulletins.

The story below was written during the Trustees' Monitoring and Evaluation visit to Vietnam in March this year. It demonstrates just how important a wheelchair can be for those who need them.

LIEN HEP'S STORY



Lien Hep with her mother and the wheelchair which was funded by donations from MSAVLC's supporters.

We travelled for a about half an hour out of central Hanoi in the direction of Quoc Lo. There we stopped in a village and were met by local VAVA officials who took us to the home of Lien Hep. She had been born in 1991, and she lived in a ramshackle house with her mother. Her father had passed away some five years before. He had been a soldier and had been fighting in Tay Ninh Province, near the Cambodian border, where he had been sprayed with Agent Orange. The chemical had affected his body, and he had been in pain for many years, finally dying from cancer as a result of the contamination in 2020.

Hep's mother looked older than her 65 years, probably due to the fact that Hep, their second child, was severely disabled, both physical and mentally. Hep was overawed by our visit and clung tightly to her mother throughout. We talked to mother through an interpreter and she confessed that her daughter could be difficult and sometimes violent.

We looked at the new wheelchair which VAVA had given her using MSAVLC funds. The local officials then showed us the broken handcart which mother had previously used to carry her daughter about (see below). We stood and chatted in the front yard, surrounded by clothes drying on a washing line, a motorbike, washing-up bowls and some meagre provisions. Hep's mother said that she was worried that a time would come when she would no longer be able to look after her daughter, and she hoped that Hep would then be able to go to a centre for Agent Orange victims.



Mother thanked us for the wheelchair and for our visit, and both the local officials confessed that they too were old soldiers and had family members who were affected by chemical contamination. We thanked the officials for arranging the visit for us, and we left Hep in her wheelchair, still clinging to her mother.

OUR SPONSORED DOCTOR

Dr Deth Chamroeunratanak

MSAVLC has sponsored Dr. Ratanak at All Ears Cambodia since October 2024. He is an extremely personable young man, and he is 33 years old.

He studied medicine at university, and on leaving in 2019, he worked for three years as a general doctor at Kanhchhrich Referral Hospital in Prey Veng Province. He then went on to work at the General Hospital in the out-patient department as a chief doctor, where he stayed for two years. Whilst there he encountered many patients with chronic ear conditions, as they had only been referred to hospital when their ears had become in a very bad condition. They had very often tried to treat ear complaints themselves and had been known to pour perfume, wine and even petrol into their ears to try to elicit a cure. He realised that this would not have been the case if they had been well educated about ear health, and had been referred earlier and been able to receive treatment. He also noted that there were very few rehabilitation services available, and that the costs were beyond their financial means. This concerned him greatly, and he decided that he wanted to help those people affected. So, he applied to All Ears Cambodia to work there, where he knew that these services were available. Whilst working at the hospital he looked after Covid patients in 2021, and he contacted Covid from them but thankfully, he recovered.

We talked to Dr Ratanak about his work at All Ears and he told us that on starting there he had been given training time by the All Ears Director, Glyn Vaughan and other members of the staff, as his training in ears as a student doctor had been limited. He told us that he had been made extremely welcome by everyone and thoroughly enjoyed the work in the clinic.

Apart from his clinical work, he explained that the rewarding part of the job for him was carrying out consultations and counselling the patient about ear care. He felt that it was so very important to educate the patient and avoid further problems. He hoped that this counselling would encourage the patient to share his knowledge with others, and encourage them to come for check-ups.

The best part of his work was when patients were healed and recommended their own families to come to the clinic. He explained that All Ears had posted information on social media advising people about ear care and where they could come for help. Patients were also referred to All Ears from various NGO's who worked in and around the area and who dealt with many impoverished children, disabled children, and some suffering from HIV. These children were much more likely to develop problems with their ears, due to low immune systems, recurrent infections, and poor hygiene.

He explained that poor families can receive a 'poor-card' from the government which enables them to receive treatment for free at a hospital. However, receiving the card is on the recommendation from the village chief, who will not recommend them if they have had an argument with him, or if they of not in when he calls on them. However, they can receive treatment at All Ears free of charge.

Dr Ratanak is passionate about his work and his desire to help people of all ages and creeds. When he was a student he, along with others, would voluntarily go out into the countryside to educate the people and explain to them about good health, and where healthcare was available if necessary.

Dr Ratanak explained that his work followed a weekly plan, and it included staff training and professional studies sessions. We were pleased to hear that the musical instruments that MSAVLC had provided in the past were still in use for diagnostic assessment, as well as for fun.



Dr Ratanak has an elder brother and sister, and he has holidayed in Thailand and Vietnam with his family.

We asked him what he did in his spare time and he told us that he likes keeping fit, running, and gardening where he grows flowers and vegetables, chillis and tomatoes. He also enjoys listening to music of all kinds, particularly pop music and jazz, and he keeps himself up to date with medical articles, public health research, and health economics/financing on the internet.

He is a lovely man, gentle, kind, and caring and an enormous asset to All Ears Cambodia. We are proud to be sponsoring him for his important work there.

Dr Ratanak was interviewed by Trustees Jenny Gold and Mary Lidgard during their visit to Cambodia in March this year.

WILLS AND LEGACIES

MSAVLC has already distributed over £156,000 this year to our projects in South East Asia, thanks solely to you, our generous donors.

We could not help the poor and sick in Vietnam and Cambodia without your support. And a little goes a long way in the developing world.

Please remember the charity when you are making, or updating your will. The Trustees will ensure that your money is wisely spent.

VAVA NATIONAL CONGRESS

VAVA, The Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin is MSAVLC's major partner organisation in Vietnam. It recently pledged to comprehensively renew its operations and mobilise social resources to ensure that none of Vietnam's victims of chemical warfare is left behind. The pledge was made at VAVA's sixth National Congress, which took place in Hanoi in late September.

The association needs to raise at least $57 million US Dollars in the next five years to support victims and their families. The funds are expected to help build or repair 2,000-2,500 houses, provide 25,000 scholarships for victims' children and give production capital for 2,000 disadvantaged victim families.

VAVA also aims to provide wheelchairs to all victims who need them, organise regular medical examinations and treatment for 5,000-7,000 victims each year, and ensure that all victims receive visits and gifts during major holidays and the Lunar New Year (Tet).

Lieutenant General Nguyễn Hữu Chính was re-elected as VAVA chairman, while Vietnam's former Vice - President Nguyễn Thị Bình was again named honorary chairwoman.

The congress, attended by delegates representing more than 400,000 members nationwide, was held under the theme 'Solidarity, compassion and responsibility, focusing on the grassroots level and victims'.

The association said the new term would focus on strengthening its organisation, improving nationwide data on victims, mobilising resources and expanding support, while renewing leadership and working methods through digital transformation.

MSAVLC is VAVA's only major supplier of funds to purchase wheelchairs. The Trustees hope to further assist VAVA in their quest to give a wheelchair to every victim who needs one.

DATA PROTECTION

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NEWS FROM NEW HOPE IN CAMBODIA

MSAVLC's support for New Hope Children's Home finished last year. However, the Trustees do keep in contact with the Director, Rostitus Cheng, and we do still support the First Aid Project which he runs at the Home, and in villages in the Poipet area. We recently learned that, despite the fact that the Thai Army has invaded some of the border villages near Poipet, the First Aid Project continues.



Rostitus recently reported:

"We do the project four times a month. We change the location, sometimes we do it at our partner churches around Poipet City and sometimes at the Camp. Our programs with children have included delousing their hair, learning about hygiene, cleaning sores and itches on the skin, treating wounds, cutting nails, painting pictures and singing children's songs. At the end we have a snack and say a prayer."



THANK YOU!

Once again, many thanks to David, Fiona and all at the Organic Farm Shop in Cirencester, for donating a further £182 from the sale of second-hand books to MSAVLC.

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