

### MIDWIVES' PROGRESS IN THE HIGHLANDS



*Kim Boi midwives trained in 2005*

We spent an interesting two hours, in Hoa Binh Province, with some of the midwives of Kim Boi District, whose training in modern methods we had funded in 2005. (This was the group I had met during the visit with the BBC's "Inside Out" team in May of that year.)

I found it satisfying to be able to discuss the practicalities of their work with these women who were obviously keen to do their work as efficiently as possible and, having had the experience of domiciliary midwifery as a family doctor, this feed-back was extremely useful and started me thinking about possible future developments. Of course, whether these will prove possible or acceptable, only time will tell. The midwives obviously found the discussion both enjoyable and useful and, I imagine, would like to repeat it next time we visit the area.

From Kim Boi, we went to Mai Chau District, by the splendid new mountain road and took photographs of Mai Chau town, looking down on it when it came

into view as we rounded a bend. It is an extremely photogenic area and it is not surprising that it should attract tourists. We were to be present at the "launch" of a fresh group of traditional midwives on their course of modern methods – a longer course this time with emphasis on prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS – in particular, of transmission of the infection from mother to baby. But we were pleased, when we went to the regional hospital, to be also given a detailed account of the achievements of the group at whose launch we had been present in October 2005 – as follows:-

*Mai Chau is an upland District of Hoa Binh Province, including seven ethnic minority groups living together in the whole District. The total population is over 490,000, in which Thai people comprise 60.2%, Kinh (i.e. people we call Vietnamese) 15.56%, Muong 15.07%, Dao 2.06%, Hmong 6.91%, Hoa and Tay 0.2%. There are 21 communes in the District and over 200 villages. Education is not uniform and there are many*

*backward traditions and customs. Over 50% of births take place at home and, in two mountainous communes of Hmong people, all births take place at home. Transport is not good and public information to remote and isolated communities and villages is limited and this influences the socio-economic situation of the people. Consequently, health care for the people here is difficult. Mai Chau is also the ecological cultural tourist area for the ethnic minority community, in particular for the Thai and Muong people. As a result, many local people and foreigners come here, and the number of people with "social evils", such as drug addiction and drug injections, is rising and is responsible for a rising incidence of HIV, currently 45% for the whole district. (The whole province has 1,520 HIV positive cases and Mai Chau has 653, coming second after Hoa Binh City).*

*For all these reasons, health workers involved with the ethnic minority people consider that looking after mothers and*

children should be the work of the whole community – of the whole nation in general and of the public health organisations in particular. Public health is the organ directly managing and carrying this out. This has been heavy work for many years but recently, Government and Party have given the matter their attention. Foreign organisations have given considerable support with materials and finance, which helps the work to be successful, which in turn helps in achieving the objectives of the reproductive health strategy from 2000 to 2010 as proposed by Hoa Binh province. In October 2005, with the support of HEDO, a training course was organised for 100 midwives and community health workers, its purpose to care for mothers and children and to carry out family planning in the community. With the knowledge gained in the training course, the midwives have gone to the most remote and isolated villages to help mothers to understand how to look after themselves and to support them if they give birth at home (as is the tradition here, partly because of difficulty in transport). The work of the midwives has brought joy and happiness to many families and, with such success, the saying of our ancestors

“Pregnancy is the door to the grave” is no longer true. Now, pregnant mothers are cared for from the start of pregnancy to delivery and post-delivery, ensuring safety for both mothers and children.

Another saying is appropriate: “Round mother: square child” which means a healthy mother and a healthy child. Moreover, the midwives apply the knowledge they have gained in the training course to help young HIV-infected mothers, and drug addicts to come back into the community with such measures as organising clubs for people to join in with topics to prevent social evils, measures such as no using drugs, preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, preventing sexual diseases, carrying out family planning, etc. In addition, cooperating with other agencies in organising singing parties between villages and communes together (thus spreading the message through the whole community) not to inject drugs, couples to live loyally together – one mother, one husband – safe sex, such as using condoms, avoiding pregnancy if they are HIV-positive. But, if they still wish to have a baby, we try to protect the baby by using AZT in late pregnancy; at delivery, midwives must wear double gloves, boots

and spectacles; ensuring hygiene by not cutting vulval hair; and, after delivery, advising the mother not to breast – feed and to avoid multiple immunisation. The use of AZT where a mother is known to be HIV-positive reduces the danger of transmission of the infection from mother to child. Frequent propaganda to encourage people to be tested for HIV at the clinics or health centres is most important.

Putting into [practice all these measures in Mai Chau District during the past year, there have been the following results:

**There were 810 births in 2006**, 65 of which were home deliveries. But, if we count from September 2005 to March 2007, **100 cases were helped by midwives trained in 2005.**

**15 children**, whose mothers have HIV and had been instructed and cared for by the midwives, **were not infected.**

**1,760 mothers and other women of reproductive age** received advice about prevention of sexually-contracted infections, HIV/AIDS, family planning, breast feeding and malnutrition.

Madeleine Sharp

## A BLIND LADY'S POEM

We first visited the Blind Association of Ky Anh District at the suggestion of Dr. Nguyen dinh Lan, the first Director of the British Friendship Hospital who, since he retired, has been much involved with health (in its broadest sense) in the community. The Association asked for our support in

providing a course in hygiene for blind women of the district, who had missed out on such a course which had been attended only by sighted women. We agreed to this and the course was a great success. When next we visited the Association, they told us that not all the money which we had sent had been used and asked if we would

add to this so that they could be provided with walking sticks made from tubular aluminium. We agreed to this also and these were obtained from the Blind Association of Norway. The success of this decision is evident from the poem below, which we were very touched to receive.

### The nodes of sticks

*To English friends who gave us lovely sticks*

*Taking a loving care of the stick in hands  
We feel that each node filled with great love  
That the friends who live very far  
gave us the sticks that are pregnant with miracle of a fairy.  
With these sticks in hands  
We could go up hill and down dale  
secure down on the river, safe up on the bridge.  
As you gave no end of power which helped us  
to overcome the dark, to eliminate the poverty.  
You had returned but left so much lofty  
and beautiful hearts  
and so much overflowing feelings!  
Many thanks all the friends who have a heart of gold.  
So many sticks, no end of love!*

March 2007

Ho thi Kim Sen

a blind lady poet in Ky Anh

# TRAVELLER'S TALES PART 1 (CAMBODIA/VIETNAM) MARCH 2007

Peter and I had been to Vietnam and Cambodia twice before joining MSAVLC, so we had a good idea of what to expect. However, this was our first official visit as members of the Executive Committee and we thought that, by accompanying Margaret Methley and Madeleine Sharp, it would be a gently-paced way of finding out about our projects. Informative it was, but gentle it most definitely was not, and it was certainly a privilege to be shown around by such a dynamic duo!

On 10th March, we met at Heathrow and set off, on time, at 9.45 p.m. About midnight, after a good meal, that dreaded announcement was made "Is there a doctor or nurse on board?" Luckily, a young doctor volunteered and had to attend to a man who was vomiting copious amounts of blood! Well, he decided that the man needed hospitalisation, so the plane had to be diverted and landed in Romania, at about two in the morning. The poor chap was taken off to hospital quite quickly, but then we had to refuel and the suppliers would only give us fuel if we paid in cash! Of course the airline did not carry that amount of cash, so we were stranded at Bucharest for four hours. Eventually they found a supplier who would accept a credit card and we set off again. Due to the four hour wait and the diversion, we did not arrive in Bangkok until 10 p.m. local time, after a 17-hour flight. We had missed our connexion to Phnom Penh. We were put up at the splendid Novotel Hotel for the night and, the next morning, after considerable negotiation, managed to get an early flight with Bangkok Airlines. We only had about four hours sleep, and none the night before, so we were all shattered.

On arrival at Phnom Penh we were met by Dr. Chiv Bunthy, Director of the Cambodian Health Committee, a non-governmental organisation which runs a TB programme which we support. He took us to the Bright Lotus Hotel and, after a wash and brush up, we went to the CHC's office where we were given a presentation concerning both their TB programme and a major research project on HIV/AIDS. The weather was wonderful but very hot and humid.

The next morning, we went, by tuk-tuk (motor-cycle-driven carriage) to see Glyn Vaughan, formerly senior audiologist at Charing Cross Hospital, who runs a non-governmental organisation (NGO) "All

Ears Cambodia". He works in the local hospital and has set up a clinic, where he works in the afternoons. He has many outreach projects in the poor rural areas, dealing with groups of under-privileged children and adults, including HIV patients and street kids. Glyn has two splendid assistants, Makara and Seyha, trained by him and totally committed. His clinic is wonderful: he wanted to make it as little like a hospital as possible and has certainly succeeded. It is very ethnic, with beautiful hand-made lamps, soft furnishings and candles. There are consulting rooms and a laboratory where hearing aids are made. Apparently the house has a chequered history. It was once a brothel and, when the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh in 1975, they slaughtered everyone they found there. The locals still speak of strange sounds and ghostly sightings, but Glyn has not encountered any. As yet, anyway!

We returned to the hotel and watched the world go by from our balcony. There was so much going on in the busy streets, with the incessant toot-toot of horns. We could see the King's Palace adorned with gold – a dramatic contrast to the poverty of the many hungry beggars.

On Wednesday, we set off to visit Deborah Groves, a friend of ours who has set up her own NGO called Helping Hands. We had told Margaret and Madeleine about her work and they were keen to meet her and see what she had achieved. We hired a minibus and it was a six-hour journey along bumpy roads to Siem Reap, but what an experience! We had never travelled inland in Cambodia before and there was so much poverty. Folk live in houses on stilts made of wood or woven rushes, some with walls, and some without, windows without glass and no doors. They are entered by rickety ladders. Large pots are outside to collect water and there was no electricity. Cows were everywhere, wandering in and out of traffic; chickens, dogs and naked children roamed about.



Since establishing her NGO, Deborah has done amazing things for a village which she "adopted". We took tuk-tuks from Siem Reap and crossed the bridge that she had had built for the villagers.

We visited a family in their home and went to the newly-built school catering for about 300 children. We chatted to the children and sang songs with them.



Deborah is also in the process of having a WC built at the back of the school – the first one ever in the district – and has cultivated a vegetable garden to teach the kids about nutrition. She has installed water filters in the school and is buying seeds and bicycles for the villagers. It was a really interesting and enjoyable day and lovely to see Deborah again. As we walked back to the tuk-tuks, we were surprised to be overtaken by a motor-bike with our octogenarian Hon. Sec. riding side-saddle on the back!

On Friday, we had further meetings with Glyn Vaughan and, on Saturday morning, Dr. Sok Thim who, with an Australian couple, had founded the CHC, joined us for breakfast. He is now Research Director of the CHC. At lunch, we were joined by Steve Harkness and Yoeung Rithy from the Disability Development Services in Pursat.

In the late afternoon, we flew from Phnom Penh to Hanoi, via Vientiane in Laos, where it was 37 degrees Celsius. We arrived at Hanoi, where it was raining and quite cool, at 7.30 p.m. It was lovely to be back in this crazy place, busy, noisy, but vibrant and exciting. We were met by a young man called Cuong from PACCOM (People's Aid Coordinating Committee) who was to be our interpreter and organiser, and Mr. Mac, the driver of our minibus, an old friend of Margaret and Madeleine, who drove us to the Ho Guom Hotel near the Lake of the Recovered Sword.

On the Sunday morning, we set off at 7.30 p.m. for a field trip to Hoa Binh Province in the Northern Highlands, first to Kim Boi District where, in 2005, we had funded a project to train “traditional” midwives in modern methods. The training is organised by HEDO (the Highland Education Development Organisation). We talked with a number of these midwives and were impressed by their enthusiasm and obvious commitment, and we felt that such a “follow-up” meeting was most useful. After lunch, we drove over a recently constructed mountain road to the district of Mai Chau, a place of outstanding beauty, popular with tourists, where we were to spend the night.



Next day, we were guests of honour at the ceremony inaugurating the training course for the next 100 traditional midwives. As well as the midwives, many provincial and district government dignitaries were present. Prior to short speeches by various representatives of the health services and responses by MSAVLC, we were entertained by the midwives with songs about family planning and health promotion! We then visited the impressive new hospital which will have care not only of the people in Mai Chau district but also in several districts in adjoining provinces. After this, we went on to a clinic in a remote highland village – basic but very effective - and we chatted to the doctors and nurses about their work. We enjoyed many wonderful traditional meals during our stay and, as is the custom, sampled the local rice wine!

It was then back to Hanoi, where we met up with HEDO officials and were able to discuss their projects at length. We also met with officers and staff of the Union of Friendship Organisations, (VUFO) which had decided to honour our Chairman, Margaret Methley, for her work for Viet Nam over many years. After the presentation, by the President of VUFO, he entertained us to luncheon at the Seasons Restaurant, noted for its outstanding seafood

On 22nd March, we met with VAVA,

the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange. It was a very moving meeting; they told us of the problems that they encounter and the work that they do. Children are still being born with terrible abnormalities as a result of Agent Orange (AO), and it is now into the third generation! We were shown a film of the



Americans spraying the countryside with toxic chemicals. 80 million litres of AO were sprayed and “hot spots” occurred at US bases where drums were emptied into the ground and rivers when the Americans withdrew. We also visited the Vietnamese Red Cross, and had a meeting with the Women’s Union, which is very powerful in Vietnam, and discussed many issues involving women’s problems and rights.

On Friday 23rd, we visited Thanh Xuan Peace Village. This is another project that we support and it was an incredibly moving experience. It is a residential school catering for about 130 children of all ages suffering from various ailments resulting from toxic chemicals (mainly AO), some mental and some physical. The teachers had a very difficult job as the abilities of the



children were so varied. Some were just able to play with Lego while others were being taught a limited curriculum.

The more able ones were making bracelets out of multicoloured beads which they were learning to do as a trade for the future. The conditions were pretty bad, the building old and in desperate need of decoration and repair, but there was a lot of love shown to the children and a lot of laughter. O how we wish that

we could persuade “Changing Rooms” to come here!



Saturday was a free day and Peter and I were invited by Khai, PACCOM’s interpreter, to visit his home in the countryside and meet his parents who are rice farmers. We went there with a friend of his on the back of motor-bikes. However, remembering that I had promised my daughter not to do anything dangerous, I bought a hard Viet Minh hat to wear instead of a crash helmet. I got such strange looks from people as this crazy, orange-haired granny flew through the countryside on the back of a motor-bike in a Viet Minh hat! We had a wonderful day; it was so interesting to



see how ordinary folk live. The house was amazing, stone-built, with superb wooden carvings in the roof and a huge shrine in the centre of the room. We were made so welcome, and we sat cross-legged on a rug to eat a banquet of vegetables, tofu, omelette, pickled vegetables, rice and soya soup, washed down with the usual rice wine and copious amounts of green tea. We felt very privileged to have had the experience.

On Sunday, we went to the cathedral in Hanoi. The church was full and so many young people attended. In the evening, there was another service and, as we walked past, we were amazed to see that the service was being transmitted

outside on a screen as the church itself was full. People were standing in the courtyard and couples were sat on motor-bikes, watching the service. It was quite amazing. The church was flood-lit and there were fairy lights in the trees. It was lovely.



On Monday, we visited the Veterans' Friendship Village, again an institute caring for AO victims. Here adolescents were being taught a trade, and we went into a classroom where boys and girls were learning to sew on electric sewing machines



They were making a variety of goods, including shirts and handbags. There was a computer lesson going on in a well-equipped computer room. They were also making pretty artificial flowers and doing embroidery. We bought some

of their wares and chatted to the children. In the afternoon, we visited Mme. Nguyen thi Binh, former Vice-President of Vietnam and currently President of VAVA. She is now in her eighties but is still working in the Peace and Development Foundation. A wonderful



lady: in 1969, while at the Paris Peace Talks, she joined the Aldermaston March, and spoke in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral on Easter Sunday.



That evening, we were joined by Faye Wakefield, a member of MSAVLC's Executive Committee, and one of the designers of our website, who was back-packing .



Next morning, we all went to the Hospital of Traditional Medicine, which takes 400 in-patients, and out-patient department which deals with 500 patients a day, a laboratory where they produce their own medicines and a dispensary. We were shown medicines being prepared and attended a session in the out-patients department where we watched a woman being treated by "cupping", where flame-heated cups are placed over the affected area.

*Mary Lidgard*



## OBITUARIES

**It is with deep regret that we have learned of the deaths of David Askins, Michael Balchin, Gill Garner, Edgar Jackson and Maggie Rosher, all of whom in their separate ways have been outstanding friends to the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.**

**We are grateful that we have known them and send our deepest sympathy to their families and friends.**

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# AN HONOUR FOR MARGARET METHLEY

During our visit to Vietnam it was with great pleasure we accompanied Margaret Methley to the Union of Friendship of Organisations (VUFO) to be honoured for her support of the people of Vietnam over a great many years. The ceremony was

presided over, in the presence of members of the staff, by the President of VUFO, Mr Vu Xuan Hong, a member of the National Assembly of Vietnam, who presented her with VUFO's Friendship Medal and a framed certificate recording the reason for the award. After the formalities we

mingled with members of staff, several of whom had accompanied us on previous visits. It was a relaxed and heart-warming occasion and everyone agreed that the award was very well-deserved.



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## A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

As reported in our November Bulletin, at our AGM Peter Lidgard was appointed Assistant Honorary Secretary of MSAVLC. This has come as a great relief to our Hon. Secretary, since it will allow an orderly and unhurried hand-over of responsibility. Furthermore, for some years, existing members have been aware of the urgent need for a transfusion of younger blood to the Executive Committee and, thanks largely to the BBC's "Inside Out" programme which was screened in the Midlands in October 2005, we now have several younger members and look forward to one of the successful spurts in our activities which have been our good

fortune in the past.

Peter's background is not medical but academic and we feel that the new mixture opens possibilities in broadening our appeal and so increasing public awareness of our existence.

Our visit to Cambodia and Vietnam in March/April was planned specifically to introduce Peter and his wife, Mary, who is a former nurse and who also was elected to our E.C., to as many of our projects as possible. It has been interesting to have the impressions of two fresh pairs of eyes and stimulating to be asked a great many searching questions. Mary's impressions are published in this issue of the Bulletin.

Mr. Lam Bao, who was at one time

Minister-Counsellor at the London embassy, accompanied us in Hoa Binh Province and Mr. Chau Phong, a former Ambassador to the UK, also joined us from time to time. Each of these old friends is a mine of useful information – on a great many subjects – and we feel very fortunate to have had their company.

Over the past six weeks, our income has increased and our Hon. Treasurer is breathing more easily. But we have still to be super-cautious and some of our projects must, unfortunately, stay "on the back burner" in the meantime. So any suggestions from our supporters will be welcome.

*Margaret Methley*