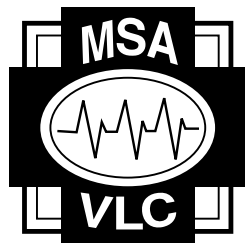


# VIETNAM LAOS CAMBODIA



## MEDICAL & SCIENTIFIC AID NEWS BULLETIN

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50p

# VIETNAM - MAY 2005



*Twin sisters Le Thu Cuc and Le Thuy An with their grandmother and cousin  
Paul Hutchins filming in the background.*

On 19th May, I went to Vietnam with a two-man team from the BBC TV's "Inside Out" programme. Supporters may remember a documentary in the same series which was shown last year – a programme dealing with a war "game" about Vietnam. Len Aldis had appeared briefly to express extreme displeasure at making a game of something from which so many people were still suffering, in particular the victims of Agent Orange. I had subsequently contacted the director of the programme to give further information about Agent Orange, and had sent him a quantity of literature about the work of MSAVLC. It was as a result of this that, some months later, he contacted me with the suggestion that they make a short documentary about us.

The visit had to be arranged at

extremely short notice and for a very short time, but we had helpful advice from the Vietnamese embassy in London and our friend Mr. Lam Bao in Hanoi, and the helpful cooperation of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which wasted no time in making the necessary arrangements for the visit. The People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM) arranged our itinerary and booked our accommodation at the Ho Guom Hotel. Without this assistance, the visit would not have been possible and we are most grateful.

The BBC team consisted of Matthew Gull, the director, and Paul Hutchins, the cameraman.

We were met at Hanoi airport by Mr. Dang Hoang Linh, from PACCOM, who was to accompany us throughout the visit and who proved both efficient and

congenial and, when we got to our car, I was delighted to find that our driver was Mr. Mac, whom I had known on several previous visits. Linh informed us that it was cooler that morning because there had been a shower during the night, but it was still pretty hot as far as we were concerned. He added that parts of Vietnam were suffering from drought, and these included Hoa Binh Province, which is where the huge hydro-electric power station is, which supplies much of the country with electricity. Water levels were so low that the station would have to be shut down if there was no improvement in the next few days and already there were power cuts.

We went immediately to the Ho Guom Hotel and, after a brief rest and a cold drink, we went to the PACCOM office to discuss our itinerary. From there, we went

to the British embassy for a short meeting with Ambassador Robert Gordon.

The following morning, immediately after breakfast, Professor Trinh Ngoc Trinh, Director of HEDO (the Highland Education Development Organisation) arrived – with three large bouquets – and invited us to lunch. We went first to the HEDO office, whose walls are covered with photographs of its activities, and thence to the Western Lake, the largest of

foyer. Rain continued unabated for about two hours.

On 23rd, we set off early for Kim Boi District of Hoa Binh Province, where we were to attend the opening ceremony of the traditional midwives' training course. This took place in a large hall and was attended by a number of provincial and district dignitaries. First of all, there were traditional songs by both men and women, after which came speeches by

and did not visit the hydro-electric station as all roads to it were blocked.

*(On the day we left Vietnam, their TV news showed the dire situation: the steamer, on which Sue and I had been promised a sail round the lake when next we should visit Hoa Binh, was at the bottom of the dam, resting on mud. We had been told that it was not local rain that was needed: the station depends on the waters of the Red River. Vietnam was currently having to buy electricity from China, and China herself was worried about its electricity supplies.)*

**Tuesday 24th.** We set off immediately after breakfast on the long drive south to Ha Tinh. We were very pleased to see that the rice crop was a good one and many people were in the fields helping with the harvest. The main road south, Highway One, and the railway run parallel with – and often quite close to – each other and, at one point *en route*, we overtook a passenger train, accelerated hugely until we were a good mile ahead, at which point we stopped, Paul and Matthew got out and took the camera and stand, shot across the



*On board the floating restaurant.*

Hanoi's lakes, and to one of the smaller floating restaurants. As we sat down to a delicious lunch, the boat started to move and we had our meal travelling round the lake. As it was a Saturday, there were scores of people in the little swan-like pedal boats. Trinh pointed out buildings of particular interest and took us ashore at a pagoda which, he said, brought good fortune to all who visited it. After returning to the hotel, we went shopping and found there was a power cut, so that the shop where I have bought lovely silk scarves and other high quality goods was doing business by torchlight. However, Paul considered this was very "atmospheric" and did some filming.

The next day, Sunday, in spite of an early night, we all slept in, so we went to have a very late and leisurely breakfast at the restaurant by the side of the Lake of the Recovered Sword, after which we visited the Jade Pagoda which is almost next door and saw the model of the giant turtle which was found in the lake about two years ago (so perhaps the Arthurian legend has some foundation in fact). It was oppressively hot and we bought fans from young people selling them. Just as we were about to leave the pagoda, there was a flurry of wind, people started running for taxis, shouting "rain" as they went, and the next minute the heavens opened and we had a tropical downpour. We were fortunate to get a taxi almost immediately but had to paddle from it through the hotel courtyard and were drenched by the time we got into the



*Exercises at the Thanh Xuan Peace Village.*

representatives of the provincial and district health departments, an explanatory speech by Professor Trinh, a response by myself and a brief meeting with some of the midwives. To our considerable disappointment, the midwives were wearing blouses and jeans and not the colourful dress of ethnic minorities that we were expecting. Then to the commune restaurant where Sue Ghosh and I had lunched in November 2004 and, from there, first to the district hospital, where two new wings had been built and would be opening in a week's time, and then to the district primary health clinic near a river, which Sue and I had also visited. The staff here are all assistant doctors (that is, they have done 3 years' training) each with a different special interest. We went straight back to Hanoi

road and assembled it and then filmed the train. We stopped at Thanh Hoa Hotel for lunch and reached Ha Tinh town in time to shower and change before dinner at a restaurant recommended by Mr. Mac.

**Wednesday 25th.** Immediately after breakfast, we had a short meeting with Ha Tinh External Relations Committee and learned that, although the province had had very little rain for some months, because of its system of canals, crops had not suffered because they could be irrigated. After this meeting, we drove to the British Friendship Hospital, where we were greeted by Dr. Le Xuan Dinh, the director, and other members of staff, and joined a little later by Dr. Nguyen Dinh Lan, the former director, and taken to the room dedicated to Dr. Joan McMichael-Askins. It was decided to film Matthew

and me walking into the hospital, with some nurses coming off duty – a nice bit of atmosphere. However, as we left the hospital office to go outside the gates, a sudden deafening noise broke out. We said “What on earth is that?” to which the reply was “It’s the insects.” “When will it stop?” we asked. “Perhaps this evening” they replied. It turned out to be cicadas in the tree which Professor Shellard and I planted in 1991, giving their mating call.

we were invited to an early lunch. In the afternoon, we went first to the Provincial Hospital where we were greeted by the Director, Master Hoang Binh and several members of staff. Matthew and Paul went to do some filming while I discussed various matters with the Director, such as the detailed costing of hare-lip/cleft palate operations, the coming visit of some medical students from Newcastle Medical School, and equipment. Most urgently

joined shortly afterwards by the BBC pair. Dr. Ngo Hong told us that the districts remaining to be involved in the anti-trachoma project are all more difficult of access than the others. As the crow flies, they are no more distant from Thanh Hoa City than the others but, because of the terrain, by road they are two to three times more distant. *(Since then, Dr. Ngo Hong has supplied detailed costing.)*

We left for Hanoi at 3.30 p.m. and, after travelling about 20 Km, called at the home of the conjoined twin girls who had been successfully separated in 2003 at the National Paediatric Institute in Hanoi. They were now about two years and three months old. The parents were, that day, visiting their native village to pay respects to the ancestors, but we were warmly welcomed by their grandmother and an aunt, who was accompanied by her small daughter who was about the same age as the twins. The twins are delightful and Paul took a lot of film, both in the house and in the lane outside, where the local small boys were clowning around for the benefit of the camera.

**Friday 27th.** After breakfast, we went to the office of the Women’s Union, where we met several old friends of MSAVLC and Matthew and Paul had an interesting chat about matters as varied as HIV/ AIDS and the micro-banking system which helps so many women and their families. Then to the office of VAVA – Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin, where we had a useful discussion. MSAVLC had offered to open a special COIF account in which donations for VAVA could be deposited until £1000 or so had accumulated, on the understanding that such monies could only be used for medical purposes, and this offer had been warmly welcomed. It was then agreed that VAVA’s appeal leaflets distributed in the UK would carry a super-imposed label giving our name and address. After lunch, we went to the Thanh Xuan Peace Village, where we



*At the Women’s Union.*

Fortunately, shortly after this it stopped as suddenly as it had started. Then we went to lunch, in a pleasant restaurant just outside at the hospital gate and, after lunch, we were shown to bedrooms upstairs for a post prandial nap, after which we went to meet Ky Anh District People’s Committee, and finally back to the hospital for a celebration of MSAVLC’s 40th anniversary. This was a very cordial affair, attended by some distinguished members of the provincial and district government, all of whom spoke warmly of the long association with MSAVLC. much was said about Dr. McMichael-Askins. Dr. Le Xuan Dinh gave a brief account of the hospital’s progress during the past year and its excellent reputation. Then Dr. Nguyen Dinh Lan gave an impassioned speech about MSAVLC and what it meant for him, and he read a poem which he had written. It was a heart-warming and quite emotional occasion and I hope it comes over well in the documentary. By the time we said our farewells, we should have been arriving at Thanh Hoa Hotel, where we were to spend the night, but it was almost midnight when we did arrive.

**Thursday 25th.** After breakfast, we met the External Relations Committee of Thanh Hoa Province with whom we discussed a number of issues, after which

needed at the moment, said Master Hoang Binh, was a kidney dialysis machine. The number of patients with kidney failure had risen recently and the two machines which were in constant use were elderly and in danger of breaking down. Some patients had been referred to a hospital in Hanoi but it also was over-burdened and these patients were to be sent back in the near future. A new machine was urgently needed and would cost £25,000. *(On returning to Hanoi, I dropped a note to the British Ambassador, explaining the urgency of the situation and asking if the embassy could help).* From the hospital, I went to the Eye Centre, where I was



*At lunch on the day of departure.*

*L to R: Paul Hutchins, Mr. Chau Phong, Mme. Nguyen thi Binh, Madeleine Sharp, Prof. Trinh Ngoc Trinh and Matthew Gull.*

were welcomed by Dr. Phuong and some of her staff before being taken on a conducted tour of the school. The children had rehearsed a welcoming song with which we joined by clapping. Afterwards, we met Chien, the young lad who was fitted originally with Jaipur limbs at Tam Diep. We had to leave the Village rather hurriedly because we had to be at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by 4.30 p.m. so that all films – both used and blank – belonging to the BBC could be boxed and sealed and stamped in order to pass through Customs the following day. We went that evening for a final meal at the Hanoi Garden Restaurant, where we were joined by our good friend Mr. Lam Bao, Linh, and a young woman from the American Museum of Natural History, who was staying at the Ho Guom Hotel.

**Saturday 28th**, the day of our departure. Our flight from Hanoi was not

until early evening, so Professor Trinh had again invited us to lunch, this time at a nearby restaurant. To our great delight, we were joined by Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh and former Ambassador Chau Phong. Having had all their films boxed up the previous day, there could be no BBC filming, although ordinary cameras were in order, but it was frustrating. All three of us were invested with HEDO medals. Much of the conversation over lunch was about Agent Orange, a tragedy with which Mme. Binh feels acutely. We told her that we hoped that the documentary would help to bring it to public notice in the UK and the MSAVLC was doing all that lay within its power to do this. *(Since then, it has been agreed that, during the Month of Peace Activities in Coventry in the autumn, there will be a special appeal for wheel-chairs for Ky Anh. It is hoped that the fact that over 100 wheel-chairs are*

*needed in just one district of one province will demonstrate the scale of the problem.)*

At about 4.30 p.m., we went to the airport, said goodbye to Linh and Mac, sailed through Customs and waited for our plane to Bangkok. At Bangkok, we had just over two hours to wait before boarding our plane to London. We got to Heathrow ahead of time, found our baggage coming on the carousel as we approached it, caught a bus immediately to the long-stay car park and were in Coventry by 10 o'clock. So ended a hectic but satisfying visit to Vietnam.

And now it is up to the editor of the Inside Out programme. Let us hope he does justice to the hard work of my companions and the miles of film which they took.

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# CELEBRATING OUR FORTY YEARS



*Celebratory luncheon 18th June 2005, Kensington Palace Thistle Hotel*

**O**n 18th June, as part of the celebration of the founding of MSAVLC in 1965, a luncheon was held at the Kensington Palace Thistle Hotel at which H. E. Ambassador Trinh Duc Dzu and Mme. Ta Kim Son, accompanied by Mr. Minh and Mme. Dzung from the Embassy, were guests of honour.

Photographs of some of our activities and projects, past and current, were on display and all present were invited to take some piece of Vietnamese craft as a memento of the occasion.

The ambassador, after expressing appreciation for the support given by MSAVLC over forty years, support which

had been especially valuable during the war and the period when a stringent economic embargo had been in place, presented a beautiful embroidered picture of the red bridge leading to the Jade Pagoda in Hanoi. Professor Shellard congratulated the government and people of Vietnam on their achievements despite huge obstacles and said that MSAVLC felt privileged to have played some part in that success. He went on to speak on a personal level, recalling some of the activities of MSAVLC and some of its outstanding supporters, and the warmth of human response throughout the country which had given the charity an effectiveness far beyond its size. He then

presented the ambassador with a picture in oils of Ham Rong Bridge, which he himself had painted.

This was the only formal part of the occasion, most of which was taken up with reminiscences, for some of those present had been supporters of the charity from its earliest years. There was a lot of laughter, mingled with regret for those who had died and, in particular, that our beloved Dr. Joan McMichael-Askins had not lived to see some of the later successes of the organisation which her humanity and enthusiasm had inspired.

A report of the event was published in the Vietnamese newspaper, Nhan Dan, on 21st June.

# CONFERENCE ON INHERITED NEUROMUSCULAR DISEASE

**M**SAVLC was the major sponsor for a training course on “Inherited Neuro-muscular Disease” held in Ho Chi Minh City on March 31st to April 2nd 2005.

Genetic diseases, like Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) are as common in South-East Asia as elsewhere in the world, but accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment are often difficult to obtain in Viet-Nam. The aim of this meeting, which was attended by nearly 200 specialist VietNameese clinicians was to increase awareness of the latest techniques and current best practice at all levels, molecular, clinical and social.

The conference was organised by members of the Centre for Inherited Neuromuscular Disease (CIND) in Oswestry, UK, and hosted by the University of HCMC Medical School. CIND was recently created when Prof. Glenn Morris moved to Oswestry from his previous position at the North East Wales Institute. The local organisers were Prof. Truong Dinh Kiet, vice-rector of the Medical School, Dr. Le Minh, the eminent neurologist, and Dr. Le thi Hao, who performed a vital liaison function as a member of both CIND and the HCMC Medical School (some MSAVLC members may remember Dr. Hao from her presentation at the AGM in the House of Commons two years ago during her MSAVLC-sponsored research visit to the UK).

The keynote speaker was Prof. Victor Dubowitz, President of the World Muscle Society and Editor-in-Chief of its authoritative journal “Neuromuscular Disorders”. The main meeting on Saturday April 2nd was preceded by two days of clinical examinations, during which Prof. Dubowitz and Dr. Ros Quinlivan met 14 “problem” patients, mostly children and young people, in the presence of their VietNameese doctors. These examinations were recorded on video and highlights were shown at the Saturday conference.

Many interesting and novel clinical diagnoses were made, many of them for the first time in Viet Nam, and they included cases of fascioscapulohumeral dystrophy (FSHD), rigid-spine muscular dystrophy (RSMDI), limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease and Bethlem myopathy. Many of these diagnoses require confirmation by laboratory tests and Dr. Hao was on hand to collect blood samples for this purpose. Within days, she had confirmed cases of Duchenne dystrophy and SMA.

After an opening ceremony on the Friday evening, the meeting started promptly at 8.0 a.m. with the presentation by Prof. Dubowitz (Imperial College School of Medicine, London) on “The Floppy Infant” which highlighted both the difficulty and importance of reaching a correct diagnosis with congenitally “floppy” babies, since some may improve and survive with appropriate care. Prof. Manfred Wehnert (University of Greifswald, Germany) then spoke on the genetics of neuromuscular disease and the likelihood of other family members being affected. Prof. Caroline Sewry (CIND, Oswestry) demonstrated the diagnostic value of microscopic examination of muscle biopsies, while Dr. Ros Quinlivan (CIND, Oswestry) gave a very well-received lecture describing best practice and the latest research into treatment and patient care. Prof. Glenn Morris reported on the latest research aimed at finding novel treatments for neuromuscular diseases. Dr. Nguyen thi Man (CIND, Oswestry) showed how the production and application of monoclonal antibodies

could help diagnosis and the monitoring of clinical trials of novel treatments, while Dr. Le thi Hao (CIND, Oswestry and HCMC Medical School) presented her pioneering work on the genetic testing of VietNameese patients for SMA and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. These talks were delivered in English with simultaneous slide projection in Viet-Nameese, but the last two talks were delivered in Viet-Nameese, also with dual slide projection.

After the two-hour video session in the afternoon, the conference closed at 4.0 p.m.

There were ample opportunities for informal meetings, both before and after the conference. On the Sunday, Prof. Kiet provided a river trip to the Mekong delta and Dr. Nguyen thi Man organised a whistle-stop post-congress tour to Nam Cat Tien National Park (where visitors saw peacock, junglefowl, monkeys and wild boar) and the beautiful mountain resort of Da Lat.

The training course was well reported both on TV and in the press. The national newspaper, Nguoi Lao Dong, ran a long article highlighting the call by Prof. Dubowitz for better education facilities for disabled children in VietNam. The course also revealed the lack of orthotic support (to prevent deformity resulting from muscle weakness) and respiratory aids in VietNam, although these can extend life in more serious cases by over 10 years and enable a near-normal lifespan in milder cases. Elsevier Publishers, the co-sponsor, presented Dr. Le Minh with a subscription to Neuromuscular Disorders as a reward

for his prodigious efforts to make the course a success. A less limited budget would have enabled us to improve the presentation of clinical examinations and to reach a wider audience (nearly all participants were from hospitals in the southern part of VietNam) but overall the course was regarded as a great success by both participants and the visiting lecturers, with many calls for a repeat performance in the future.



*L to R: Prof. Glenn Morris, Prof. Truong Dinh Kiet, Prof. Victor Dubowitz.  
(Photograph by Dr. Le Thi Hao)*

# A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

We are now forty years old! In that time, we have done whatever we could to support projects in many parts of Vietnam, in as many ways as we could (sending medicines, medical equipment, books and journals) and this included helping with the equipping and upkeep of the British Friendship Hospital at Ky Anh. In Hanoi, we have supported the Bach Mai Hospital, the National Institute for Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Institute of Paediatrics, the Institute of Traditional Medicine, (one of whose doctors we supported in a research project at the Burns Department of the Churchill at Oxford) the Thanh Nhan Hospital, the Thanh Xuan Peace Village and the Morning Star Clinic for Handicapped Children. In Thanh Hoa, we have supported projects for repair of hare lip and cleft palate, cataract operations, a major programme to treat and eventually eliminate the eye infection *trachoma*.

We supplied "Glostavent" anaesthetic machines to the provincial hospital in Thanh Hoa and also to a number of other hospitals. In Ha Tinh province, we have funded cataract operations and provided equipment for the ophthalmology department of its provincial hospital and supported the British Friendship Hospital in Ky Anh district. Before the electrification of the country, we had provided solar-powered lamps to the hospital and the thirty-one primary health

clinics for which the hospital is responsible. One of our special projects brought the standard of cervical screening in the district and provincial hospitals of the south of the country up to that of the Tu Dzu Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, while the provision of a blood-analysing machine facilitated the screening of a wide section of the population. Also in Ho Chi Minh City the provision of equipment to test the hearing of babies and young children has meant that actual or potential hearing impairment was discovered in its early stages. In co-operation with HEDO (the Highland Education Development Organisation) we have helped to raise the standard of primary health care in a number of mountainous provinces. And in recent years, we have managed to renew contact with Laos and Cambodia and have assisted an audiology project in Laos and, in Cambodia, treatment in the community of patients with tuberculosis.

For some years, we have funded a post-graduate scholarship for a Vietnamese medical scientist at the North-East Wales Institute (now moved to the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital at Oswestry) and the researches have yielded knowledge of great practical – and economic – importance.

We had originally expected to "wind down" when the war came to an end but, for one reason and another, found that we were needed as much as ever – perhaps even more so – after 1975. For one thing,

the evil results of the use of Agent Orange were not fully apparent until the war ended, and this is a problem which grows relentlessly year on year.

There is immense need for our support. We cannot do the grander things that really large charities do but, just because we are small and because we concentrate on primary, grass-roots projects, tend to respond to specific requests and know the people on the ground who are implementing the programmes, our comparatively modest contributions are surprisingly effective in what they achieve.

But so many other worthy and urgent causes – like the *tsunami* appeal at the beginning of this year – are presented to us almost every week and our pockets are not bottomless. Vietnam's problems are less spectacular – or perhaps it is just that, because they have been around for so long, they have ceased to seem as spectacular as they are and so have lost their appeal to our news media – so the public are less aware of them. We hope very much that the short documentary which the 2-man BBC TV team made in Vietnam in May (described in the first article in this Bulletin) will prove useful in showing some of the problems facing its people (as well as their achievements) and will stimulate discussion when it is shown on our screens in October or November. Look out for the programme – on BBC1 in the "Inside Out" series.

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## A MESSAGE FROM CAMBODIA

"All Ears Cambodia is a not-for-profit NGO supported by MSAVLC, assisting Khmer people with ear problems. We are building a library as a training resource and welcome any donations of second-hand books on general medicine, human biology, anatomy and physiology, etc.

"Please send to 21 St. George's Drive, Brinsworth, South Yorkshire, S60 5NG,

or contact Glyn Vaughan in Phnom Penh by email at [glynvaughan@hotmail.com](mailto:glynvaughan@hotmail.com) if you wish to learn more about how you can help."

## FORTY YEARS OF DEVOTED

**SUPPORT – an up-to-date account of the history and work of MSAVLC by Professor Shellard – is at the printers and will be on sale by mid-September. Price £5.50 (including postage) – from the Hon. Secretary, 49 Baginton Road, Coventry, CV3 6JX.**

**Cheques payable to MSAVLC**

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## OBITUARY

We are sorry to have to announce the death of Mr. Arthur Prior, A.A.C.C.A. of Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire. Mr. Prior had, for many years, been MSAVLC'S Honorary Independent Examiner and we are thus greatly indebted to him. We have also heard only recently of the deaths of the Very Revd. A. Jowett of Sheffield and Ms. Sheila Butler of Sheffield. To the families and friends of all these we send our deep sympathy coupled with our thanks for their loyal support.

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