

Celebrating years of bringing health care to Cambodia

Awareness Cambodia Inc. Newsletter ISSUE 2 2016

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This year we celebrate 10 years of bringing health care to rural Cambodia through our medical stream – Operation Nightingale (ON). To mark this outstanding milestone, we interviewed our CEO, Dr Gary Hewett, who initiated the ON project in 2006. This grassroots health program has transformed thousands of lives over the last decade, offering medical assistance to the most vulnerable and educating healthcare professionals.



Interviewer

At the time that you approached the Kompong Speu Provincial Health Department for assistance you were unaware that they had only three doctors working across 22 clinics providing health care to nearly 800,000 people. How did you respond to finding this out?

CEO Dr Gary Hewett

Celebrating years

Around 2003, antiretroviral drugs became available to treat HIV positive kids in Cambodia, but they were excessively expensive. After some years of paying for the medications for the children in our care, I decided to go to the Provincial Health Department to see if they could access the drugs at a lower cost. As I sat in the Deputy Director's office he explained the department had approximately 800,000 people in the province, 22 health clinics to serve those people and only three doctors, including himself, working in the clinics. I immediately pictured treating the needs of Perth's population at the time with six doctors – it was farcical. So I turned to him and said, "Maybe you can't help us, but maybe we can help you!".

Within the year, Awareness Cambodia established the Operation Nightingale program.

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Interviewer

Since ON started, what impact has it had on the medical services provided to people living in these provinces?



CEO Dr Gary Hewett

Celebrating **10** years

This year we celebrate 10 years of Operation Nightingale services. What started with one clinic at Krang Skus, operating one session a week in 2006, has grown into seven clinics providing about 3,500 rural Cambodian villagers (of whom around 50 per cent are children) with free, year-round primary medical care. Under the leadership of Director Dr Chenda Lim, Operation Nightingale's programs are delivered by highly-trained Cambodian doctors, all of whom have international post-graduate degrees, and nurses. Importantly, we work with the Provincial Health Department to deliver our programs and train medical professionals.

The average patient we see earns about \$70 per month and has to overcome challenges associated with illiteracy and malnutrition, as well as their medical issues. An additional 1,000 patients are seen at remote mobile clinics, for many these clinics are the first time they've seen a doctor. Our Cambodian staff are joined at these clinics by the volunteer Australian medical professionals who come to Cambodia each year to provide additional care and treatment services and to mentor our local doctors and nurses.

A few years ago I heard a story which really confirmed the impact we were making. Turns out Krang Skus health centre staff decided to make additions at the rear of the clinic due to growing patient numbers. Instead of asking Awareness Cambodia for additional funds, staff had "passed the hat" around the village to fund construction. To say the least I was amazed. I had to ask why they had asked people on \$70 per month to fund construction. Staff told me the whole community deeply appreciates the ongoing healthcare and complete turnaround in their health and wellbeing. This was their opportunity to show that appreciation.

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Interviewer

Cambodia has the highest incidence of breast cancer in South East Asia, and it is the leading cause of death in Cambodian women. Tell us about the initiative you have started to address this crises.

CEO Dr Gary Hewett

Celebrating **10** years

Breast and cervical cancers are the leading causes of death in Cambodian women. Around 1,500 new cases of cervical cancer and 1,400 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year. Despite these cancers being largely treatable, many Cambodian women do not seek treatment early enough to be saved. Awareness Cambodia recognises healthy mothers lead to healthy Cambodian families, but also realises Cambodian women have limited access to medical services and health education, and also very limited funds.

To combat these devastating, but often preventable diseases, we started a two-year screening and education program to increase awareness and early detection. Over the two years we will screen and educate 1,440 rural women aged between 17 and 65. One year in, we have played a vital part in helping a number of women beat these cancers by providing the tests and referring them on for treatment.



Interviewer

What is Operation Nightingale putting in place for the future to sustain long-term growth in healthcare and education in rural Cambodia?

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CEO Dr Gary Hewett

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If we take a moment, I believe each of us in some way wants to know someone else's load is lighter because of us. I don't want to leave planet earth the way I found it. That means doing things in a way that lasts, which is why I believe sustainability is best addressed by understanding what really matters in any culture – People. Cambodia's people are the heartbeat and future of their nation. That's why we invest in the ongoing education of our doctors and partner with the Cambodian Health Department to educate and train their staff.

Three years ago, as part of our rural scholarship program for poor but academically gifted students, Awareness Cambodia took in our first **medical scholarship students**. In about four years' time they will be employed as Operation Nightingale doctors and start giving back to poor communities.

For 10 years I have been presenting "love your neighbour" as a principle underpinning care-giving to a number of my senior Cambodian doctors. Last year two of them met an old classmate, who just happens to be the youngest son of the current Prime Minister, and formed the first Cambodian Medical Alumni. I now serve with them and His Excellency on a Board that oversees 350+ Cambodian doctors and specialists going into remote areas twice a month, providing free medical care and follow-up surgery in Phnom Penh. It has been amazing to see those doctors "pay it forward" and it bodes so well for the future of healthcare in Cambodia.

That's' sustainability through investing in people, not just programs.



Donate now!

Your donations ensure Awareness Cambodia continues to provide a holistic range of services to help vulnerable Cambodian children and their local communities.

Please consider making a donation to our cause, so we can continue our mission – empowering people through healthcare and education. Donations over \$2.00 are tax deductible in Australia.

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Rebuilding the Children of Cambodia

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