

By Nadeeja Koralage



Dr Beat Richner with the King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihamoni at the opening of a new-wing and MRI facilities in Siem Reap.

Dr Beat Richner AND THE KANTHA BOPHA FOUNDATION

In Siem Reap, a few miles from Cambodia’s famous Angkor Wat temple, a paediatrician is making a strange request of a crowd gathered in a lecture hall, late at night. “I ask the younger guests for blood, especially type B and O. I ask the older guests for money and those in between for both. So blood or money, *that* is the question.”

They have come to hear him play the cello, in return for a donation to the Kantha Bopha Foundation, a collection of hospitals offering free health care to Cambodia’s children. The cellist is Dr Beat Richner, a Swiss trained doctor who came to Cambodia 18 years ago following the fall of the Khmer Rouge to rebuild Phnom Penh’s main paediatric hospital.

He has since built four more international-standard children’s hospitals, with facilities such as CT and MRI, which are otherwise scarce in Cambodia. The Kantha Bopha hospitals treat 85% of Cambodia’s paediatric cases in a country where nearly half of the population is under 18.

Every day, they admit 300 children, perform 60 surgical procedures, see 3,000 children in outpatient clinics and give 1,500 vaccinations. The obstetrics team in Siem Reap performs 50 caesarean sections each day, with a focus on reducing the maternal transmission of HIV, a growing problem in Cambodia.

The foundation receives little official funding, although 8% of Kantha Bopha’s budget comes from the Cambodian government and 8% comes

from the Swiss government. Most of the remaining money comes from a number of large private donors in his native Switzerland, while \$7 million a year comes from the regular cello concerts that Richner plays. “I’ve played the cello since the age of nine. Now the cello is helping me to get the money for the hospitals,” he told the *SMA News*.

His concert is a mix of haunting melodies played on the moodiest of string instruments, unaccompanied. He shows a video of the story of his first hospital in Phnom Penh. The video shows a younger, slimmer man who looks less troubled. As the video ends, he starts to rant about the social injustices suffered by the people of Cambodia.

“Without our independent blood lab, we would contaminate seven kids a day with HIV and twenty with Hepatitis B. We would not have this lab if we followed the WHO guidelines. We would not have a CT or ultrasound either and could not diagnose TB.”

“What’s happening in Cambodia is not because of totalitarianism and Pol Pot... It’s the system we are part of and it’s a system that is causing misery here”.

His work has been criticised by several organisations that feel that his actions and funding are not sustainable. However, he has his own criticisms of their approach. “An NGO which only supports a hospital or health centre by employing a few foreigners but does not simultaneously build up infrastructure and diagnostic means,



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which only implements medication as prescribed by the Ministry of Health and which in most cases is not effective due to the high cases of resistance of the population, such an NGO is useless... The salaries paid to the foreign employees constitute the expensive items in the budget, even though these foreigners cannot achieve any more with the existing infrastructure than the Cambodian doctors.”

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Cambodia 1975. The Khmer Rouge has taken power by overthrowing the ruling Lon Nol government and the lives of the citizens are about to be changed forever. Under the brutal dictatorship of Pol Pot, doctors, scientists, teachers and anyone with a higher education, as well as their extended families were marched into the countryside and murdered. The cities were evacuated, with anyone refusing to leave shot. Survivors lived as poor peasants with meagre food rations and hours of hard manual labour, leading to widespread death from disease and exhaustion. The regime wanted to return to a so-called golden age of a classless society, and hoped to achieve this by murdering everyone but those living as peasants. Even the ability to speak a foreign language would mean that if your secret was known, death was on the cards. Pol Pot wanted to create a ‘year zero’, a year where the country would start again, with everyone on an equal footing.

Estimates of the death toll during the regime reach as high as 3 million and travelling to Cambodia today it is evident; you rarely see anyone over the age of forty.

The regime was finally brought to an end when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, sending Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge fleeing to the Cambodia/Thailand border. But the development of the country since this point has been stilted by rampant corruption. Today, Cambodia remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to Transparency International. The Belgium-based NGO ranked the country as 162nd most corrupt, out of 180 reviewed.

Despite criticising high wages paid to NGO workers, Richner pays all hospital workers – from doctors to cleaners – very good salaries by Cambodian standards. Cleaners earn US\$250 a month, nurses US\$500 and doctors US\$1000 – compared to the US\$50 they would earn in state hospitals. This, as he discusses during one of his cello concerts, is to avoid the risk of corruption within the hospital. When a staff member is on a good salary, they do not need to turn to bribery. Creating a

hospital free of corruption has not been an easy task in one of the most corrupt countries in the world, “...especially at the beginning it was a huge fight. In 1992, 1993 and 1994 we had cases of corruption. I stopped the people involved working in our hospital. There have been no further cases in the last six years.”

Richner has made many sacrifices in order to pursue his mission in Cambodia. “I was a paediatrician with my own private clinic and working with two big private clinics for Neonatology. As an entertainer and musician, I gave about 50 performances per year. I had my wonderful house with a view of the mountains and the Lake Zurich and was driving two Mercedes. These beautiful and luxurious things now are lost.”

If it sounds like he is ready to return to an easier life, Richner is clearly tied to his work in Cambodia, “For the past eleven years, the lives of 50,000 children have depended yearly on the initiative of one person... And this puts me personally under enormous pressure, which at times becomes almost unbearable. There is no way to mitigate the pressure; you become a prisoner of your own conscience.”

Dr Beat Richner is offering a two month course, free of charge, aimed primarily at junior doctors from ASEAN countries on the logistics behind setting up a hospital in a developing country. He aims to “inspire and educate young doctors who might thus be motivated and prepared to take on a more humanitarian role”. The first course runs from October 5, 2009 – December 6, 2009. ■



For more information about the course or hospital group, check out <http://www.beat-richner.ch/>