



Screening was often makeshift, conducted on mattresses in school halls. Here, two team members are checking the lungs and mouth of a young child, looking for common infections and tooth decay, etc



Screening a child at one of the kindergartens



Screening children at Khaen Thong Orphanage. The children here are very young, ranging from infants to six-year-olds. It was initially difficult as the children had to be handled delicately and quickly

Ten Days in Khon Kaen

By Daryl Chia, Ho Zhuan Yi and Judith Ong

Situated 445 km from Bangkok, Khon Kaen is a city touted to become the next capital of Thailand. Already a trade and political centre of northeastern Thailand, it has been earmarked by the government for accelerated development. Usually shunned by tourists, it was where the eight of us headed to this summer holiday for Project Khon Kaen. With the generous sponsorship of the Lee Foundation, National University Health System (NUHS), SingHealth and other partners, this pioneering project aimed to provide health screening for children in Khon Kaen.

The project was planned in a short span of two months. The major difficulty in the planning of this project was liaising with the local schools/orphanages due to the distance and language barriers. However, we were lucky enough to have a friend who is based in Khon Kaen to help us out with the pre-trip planning. Our team also went for a training and exposure stint at KK Women's and Children's Hospital where we learnt about the principles of community work and picked up tips on handling children. Learning how paediatricians distracted and coaxed their patients into cooperation certainly served us well during the project. We also set out to gather the needed resources for our trip. As we aimed to minimise expenditure, we were most fortunate to obtain the loan of fundoscopy and otoscopy sets from Welch Allyn, as well as glucometers and glucose strips from Johnson & Johnson. We were very heartened to receive the support of these companies. In addition, SMA and the Dentistry chapter of Project Sabai gave us items for dental hygiene, enabling us to move forward with our plans!

In a blink of an eye, D-Day was here and we all gathered at Changi

Airport in the evening for our flight to Bangkok. After a bumpy six-hour bus ride from Suvarnabhumi Airport, we arrived in Khon Kaen at 5 am. The large number of children to be screened, considering our manpower and length of stay, meant that we had to work quickly and efficiently. After checking in to our hotel, we set off immediately for our first destination, eager and excited, but with a tinge of uncertainty.

Our team spent ten fruitful days in Khon Kaen screening four different institutions, the first of which was Khaen Thong Orphanage. Here, we performed health check-ups for the children, who ranged from infants to three to four year olds. These abandoned children are screened yearly by the health authorities if there is sufficient manpower. We soon realised how challenging it was to manoeuvre the infants for examination, much of which had to be done swiftly so that they wouldn't burst into tears out of discomfort! However, we quickly learnt, adapted and eventually screened all the children to the best of our abilities.

The memory of this orphanage will forever be etched in our minds, as we were burdened to find that unlike the children in Singapore, the majority of children in the orphanage failed to reach their respective developmental milestones and were small for their age. We were also dismayed that despite our persistent efforts to make them laugh or smile, few children would interact with or respond to us.

We then split ourselves into two groups, with one setting off to Maryphorn Kindergarten and the other to Banruk Kindergarten. In these two kindergartens, we first taught a short lesson on dental and personal hygiene which the children thoroughly delighted in, after which we

examined them class by class. The children were vivacious and it was wonderful to see them playing with each other, and some could even speak English! It uplifted our spirits that even though many of them had poor dentition, the majority were in the pink of health!

Sri Sangwan School, a centre for children with disabilities, was the next place we ventured. Our team introduced new zestful games for the children to play, which encouraged exercise and movement. The joy on their faces as they wholeheartedly played our games was a reward in itself! Following the games, we adjourned back inside to screen the children. This was an enriching experience because we gained a copious amount of knowledge about cerebral palsy and physiotherapy too!

Later, we also toured Khon Kaen University and participated in a merry evening of cultural exchange with their physiotherapy students and staff of the Faculty of Associated Medical Sciences.

Lastly, our team visited Don Doo School to examine the children there as well. There seemed to be a perpetual stream of children queuing up for their turn so we knew we had to work speedily to screen all of them. We also managed to examine some of the adults, who were the teachers and principal of the school. It was a perfect and meaningful way to end the trip, as we bonded and worked stupendously together as a team to finish screening the never ending line of children at this school!

While the work was gruelling during these ten days, it left us with a deep sense of satisfaction and also challenged our perspectives on a few issues. Having met many organisations with many needs, we had to decide which particular group of people we could potentially impact,

given our limited resources. We also had to consider very carefully how to ensure that our future projects would be sustainable. Most importantly, we were reminded that there is a very real need for help both in the local and overseas communities.

Through this pioneer trip, we managed to establish local contacts and relationships with the institutions we have screened. We also got a clearer picture of the healthcare system in Thailand, and identified the needs of the various institutions. What we found was a very good match between what was lacking in terms of healthcare there and what we could offer – health screening services. Beyond that, we hope to work towards enabling the people there to take better care of the health needs of the children. As such, during our next trip, not only will we be conducting health screenings for children, but we will also be implementing dental hygiene and staff training programmes to enable the staff to tackle simple health issues.

Next year, we plan to bring down another team to the areas identified with a need for annual health screenings. This includes Khaen Thong Orphanage, Maryphorn Kindergarten, Banruk Kindergarten and Don Doo School. In particular, we will be giving more aid to Khaen Thong Orphanage, as it was the institution with the greatest need. We hope to bring down supplies such as donated thermometers, diapers and health supplements. We are also looking into expanding our screening services to include more schools.

We aim to make this an annual long term project and look forward to working closely with Health Expeditions International and the National University of Singapore (NUS) Medical Society in the future! **SMA**



Running a hygiene programme in a local kindergarten, where we taught children to brush their teeth and wash their hands, through skits, stories, demonstrations and games



Games Day at Sri Sangwan School, which caters to disabled children. Simple games such as passing balls encouraged them to explore the limits of their disabilities and learn to work around them



Our team on a house visit to see a patient with cerebral palsy. We checked for joint stiffening and contractures which commonly occur in such patients, and also conducted a general health check-up on him

A big thank you

This project would not have been made possible without the generous support and donations we have received. As such, we would like to thank the following:

Health Expeditions International – for working so closely with us
Johnson & Johnson – for their donation of glucometers, test strips and lancets
Lee Foundation – for their generous monetary contribution
NUHS – for providing corporate gifts and materials
Project Sabai (Dentistry) – for their donation of 200 bottles of mouth wash
SingHealth – for providing expertise, guidance and training

SMA – for their donation of 204 sets of toothbrushes and toothpaste

Welch Allyn – for lending us fundoscopes and otoscopes
62nd NUS Medical Society – for their support and help
Evan Yap – our liaison in Thailand for his invaluable help and advice. This project would not be successful without his help and his hardworking team of translators who worked tirelessly alongside us! It was certainly no easy feat!

If you would like to contribute to Project Khon Kaen 2012 in any way, drop us an email at projectkhonkaen2012@gmail.com and we will get back to you!

Donations required include: thermometers, otoscopes, diapers, health supplements for children, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and finger print machines. All other medical equipment, monetary contributions or even suggestions would be greatly appreciated!