

CAMBODIA

PRESCRIBING CONFIDENCE

A new state-of-the-art hospital in Kampot will give the Kingdom's fractured healthcare system a boost

By Charlie Lancaster Photography by Sam Jam

When Keo Charnay's wife fell ill at the start of the year, the doctors in Cambodia's southern town of Kampot were stumped. They couldn't identify the cause of her illness; but eventually she got better. Then in April the symptoms returned. At a loss of what to do, the doctors recommended she go to a hospital in Phnom Penh. Keo Charnay, or Nick as he is known, didn't have the money, so he brought her home. The following day, his wife and mother of his two children died, aged 32.

"I am convinced if we had access to good doctors or enough cash to go to Phnom Penh, where there are good doctors," said Nick, "she would have survived."

Like in many parts of Cambodia, the dearth of properly trained doctors and fully equipped hospitals has taken its toll on Kampot's population. The Kingdom has one of the highest infant, child and maternal mortality rates in the region, and stories abound of people being left untreated, illnesses being misdiagnosed and staff demanding inflated compensation for mediocre services.

"I didn't trust the hospitals in Kampot," said Sos Vathano of the time her 10-month-old twins fell ill, so they immediately travelled the 150km to Phnom

Penh. The waiting time at the capital's free paediatric hospital was too long, so they went a further 290km to her hometown of Battambang. The story there was similar to that in Kampot. "They still aren't getting better; the doctors don't know why," she told the *Southeast Asia Globe* last month.

Unfortunately, cases like this are all too common in Cambodia, where health expenditure only accounted for 7% of the 2011 budget and the national healthcare service relies heavily on an embryonic system of insurance, health equity funds and non-government organisations. Yet, Nick and Sos Vathano are hopeful a new hospital, where they are both employed, due to be inaugurated in April, will change the fate of ill children and women in the impoverished southern provinces.

The Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital (SKMH) is a state-of-the-art centre that aims to provide the poor with quality healthcare, therefore contributing to Cambodia's millennium development goals to reduce child and maternal mortality.

"The hospital is another step in the delivery of healthcare services in the southern part of Cambodia," said Dr Yos Phanita, Sonja Kill Foundation Cambodia executive director, ◻



Lean on me: Grischa Roehrig, Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital project manager

during a visit to the centre. The 150-bed hospital is to play a complementary role with the existing health providers in regional provincial hospitals. Besides Kampot, it will service Kep, Takeo and Preah Sihanouk provinces, with a combined population of nearly two million.

“The impact on child and maternal mortality will be felt immediately,” said Yos Phanita. Taking five years to build, the hospital is the realisation of one German family’s plan to build a memorial hospital for their daughter Sonja, who died in a traffic accident, aged 21. Driven by a desire to help those less fortunate, the Sonja Kill Foundation is a charity that also supports a school project in Brazil as well as a centre for survivors of human trafficking and child prostitution in Nepal.

In Cambodia, the idea was to establish a free hospital for the poor, but the ambitious project reached a funding stumbling block when the global financial crisis took its toll on the company behind the charity. Revising its project plan, the foundation partnered with Hope worldwide, and encouraged by the success of its network of five hospitals in Cambodia, including Phnom Penh’s Sihanouk Hospital Centre of Hope, they introduced a sliding scale fee for service at SKMH. Those who are able to pay will help to subsidise those who have less ability to pay.

“We will also have a tremendous impact on how healthcare operates financially,” said Yos Phanita. While government spending on healthcare has increased steadily in recent years, reaching \$10 per capita in 2008 (by way of comparison, the United Kingdom spent \$3,129 per capita in the same year), about 60% of health expenditure is out-of-pocket. “Up until now, non-government organisations have provided the foundations of the health service in Cambodia,” explained Yos Phanita. “However, a system that relies on funding does not provide security in the long run; self-sustainability does. We are seeing a new trend in financing health services and SKMH is a part of this because it is a necessity.”



Locked down: the positive room pressure system prevents cross-contamination of operating theatres



Key role: head of maintenance, Nuorn Longdy manages 29 staff



Nice touch: sleeping quarters sit at the back of the hospital



Hands on: an onsite carpentry team has built much of the furniture



Men at work: staff apply the final touches to Kampot’s newest hospital

The training of staff is a cornerstone of the hospital that preaches quality not quantity. After a quick tour of the centre, spread out across seven-hectares of land donated by the government, it’s clear SKMH has the potential to not only deliver certain health standards, but also set the health benchmark across the country.

Three doctors, three nurses, one lab technician and one radiologist will man examination rooms, a laboratory, the radiology department and a pharmacy. Costing roughly \$8m, plus donations, to build and equip, SKMH is supported by state-of-the-art technology. In case

“The impact on child and maternal mortality will be felt immediately”

Yos Phanita, Sonja Kill Foundation Cambodia

of power failure, a full generator system is further supported by a UPS battery bank system, which provides power to all emergency medical equipment. From solar panels that heat water, to a purifying system that provides drinking water, and a positive room pressure system (an isolation technique used to prevent cross-contamination from room to room) in operating theatres, every detail of this hospital has been planned to ensure excellence.

“I believe no hospital of such a technical standard currently exists in Cambodia,” said Grischa Roehrig, the hospital’s project manager. Designed by German

architect Hans Haff, the layout of the hospital ensures an easy flow of patient and medical traffic, and caters for families, who can sleep on the property in bungalows that can be converted into emergency wards in case of epidemics.

Confident that the need for such a hospital in Cambodia is so great, Yos Phanita believes “patients will actually travel from Phnom Penh to come to SKMH”.

“Long-term medical assistance doesn’t really exist in Cambodia,” he added. “If someone has a chronic disease or requires long stays in hospital, we have a unique value attraction.”

It isn’t the only attractive thing about the health centre. Sonja Kills’ father insisted the hospital have a green touch, to aid recovery time. Bougainvillea plants fence in the buildings, bushes and palm trees dot the landscape and flowers bloom in the nursery. Staff members happy to be a part of such a project have even donated plants from their gardens.

“The hospital is a good thing for Kampot as it will raise the standard of healthcare in the region,” said Nick, who has been working at the hospital for two years – first as a gardener and then as a carpenter. “It will save lives in the future.” ■