

# HOC MÃI NEWS

Hoc Mai — The Australian Vietnam Medical Foundation



Issue 04 / January 2005

## Pianos key to dinner success

Australian concert pianists Simon Tedeschi and Kevin Hunt were the star attractions at a fundraising dinner for Hoc Mai held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The two teamed up for a night of Gershwin and jazz performing on twin Steinways sponsored by Theme & Variations. More than 300 supporters of Hoc Mai attended the third annual gala dinner which raised \$93,000 for the Hoc Mai Australia House project at Viet Duc Hospital and the scholarship program.

Foundation Chairman Professor Bruce Robinson announced that one of the guests had made a donation of \$40,000 towards the building project.

Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of NSW, was the guest of honour and spoke about the Vietnamese need for medical education particularly in the Dien Bien province where the infant mortality rate is the highest in Asia. Professor Bashir is the driving force behind the Hoc Mai maternal child health project in Dien Bien which is being run in collaboration with the Vietnam Women's union and the Ministry of Health.

Guest speaker at the dinner was Michael Mann, President of RMIT Vietnam and the former Ambassador who spoke



Bruce Robinson with the Governor at the dinner

of the dramatic economic changes in Vietnam and the Vietnamese thirst for education.

One of the highlights of the night was the "Made In Vietnam" stall which raised \$1400 through the sale of Vietnamese jewellery and artefacts, many of them designed and donated by the Australian community in Hanoi. A "book stall" raised nearly \$3,000 for text books to send to libraries and hospitals in Vietnam. Many of the guests purchased a textbook and were able to sign it personally.

The raffle of a holiday in Vietnam was won by Mrs Barbara May and raised almost \$8,000.

## Chuc Mung Nam Moi (Happy New Year) from the Chairman

The key to our success this last year has been the extraordinary goodwill shown to Hoc Mai by the community and the health profession. Through their support we have been able to expand our exchange program and educate a further 30 Vietnamese doctors and nurses in keeping with our training the trainer philosophy.

As you can appreciate, the need for assistance in a country with 80 million people is enormous. I would like to thank all my colleagues who have given their time so generously in supporting our Vietnamese visitors.

Through the incredible support from philanthropic organisations like Rotary, the Australian Vietnam Chamber of Commerce in Hanoi and the Asia Pacific Friendship Group of the NSW Parliament, we are able to fulfil our dream of establishing a hostel for the relatives of the patients at Viet Duc Hospital. This was a major undertaking and would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of companies like PTW Architects. One of Hoc Mai's major supporters, who wishes to remain anonymous, has been instrumental in helping us achieve our goal.

2005 presents us with new challenges. One of the most significant projects we are undertaking is the maternal child health education project in the remote mountainous province of Dien Bien. This project has been supported by the University of Sydney's International Development Fund.

We are also assisting the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne with a major education project in cardiovascular disease in Hue. In addition we have initiated links with hospitals in Ho Chi Minh City.

I would like to thank the Board of Hoc Mai for their support this last year.

**Prof Bruce Robinson**



Alicia Afuang at the Made in Vietnam stall



Profs Nutbeam and Robinson at Viet Duc Hospital

## Pro Vice Chancellor visits Hanoi

Professor Don Nutbeam, Pro Vice Chancellor Health Sciences, gained an insight into the Hoc Mai program on a recent visit to Hanoi. He was welcomed at the Hanoi Medical University where he met representatives from the School of Public Health. During a tour of the major teaching hospitals, he was able to observe our second year medical students working alongside the Vietnamese doctors as part of their option term training. One of the highlights was a visit to the National Hospital for Acupuncture where Prof Nutbeam was shown the operating theatres and the drug rehabilitation unit where patients are successfully treated for heroin addiction with acupuncture. He hosted a dinner for the Hoc Mai Club where he met 20 Vietnamese doctors who have been trained in Sydney under the scholarship program.

## French Honour for Health Leader

The late celebrated Vietnamese doctor Ton That Bach has been given the "Academic Palm" award by the French government to honour his enormous contributions to the development of Vietnam's health care.

Dr. Bach, who died in March last year, was instrumental in establishing the Hoc Mai exchange program. He was the former Dean of Hanoi Medical University and Director of Viet Duc Hospital.

## Hoc Mai helps minority women in Dien Bien

by Elizabeth Elliott

In October I was part of a group of health professionals representing the Hoc Mai Foundation, privileged to visit Vietnam as part of the Dien Bien Phu Maternal and Child Health Project.

The project was initiated by Her Excellency, Prof Marie Bashir, the Governor of NSW, who had been alerted to the extremely high levels of maternal and infant mortality in Dien Bien Province by the Vietnam Women's Union who asked Prof Bashir for help.

It was a fascinating trip and the Vietnamese were exceptionally friendly, capable and hospitable. There are relatively few international visitors to this region and we were treated like kings... plied with food and drink at every move. We stayed in the guest house of the People's Committee near the centre of town — an airy place with large rooms and reception foyers in a quiet street — as guests of the local People's Committee.

At the welcome dinner we were surprised to see a 1997 Bordeaux on the table and as we had toast after alternate toast of rice wine and red wine, we became grateful that the portions were small.

We visited a range of health services at Commune, District and Provincial level, accompanied by an entourage of representatives from Public Health, the Women's Union, the Communist Party, and the health services.

Maternal, infant and under-5 year mortality rates are significantly higher than for Vietnam overall. Up to 50 per cent of women living in the mountains — most belong to an ethnic minority — deliver at home. This reflects a lack of education and access to health services in this isolated region. Some live as many as 50km by foot from the nearest village health centre!

Frequently observed complications in pregnancy include haemorrhage (the main cause of maternal death), hypertension and infection. We identified interventions that could address these problems and be cheap, effective and easily taught. In newborn babies, hyperbilirubinaemia (jaundice), infection and intracranial haemorrhage due to lack of administration of vitamin K are common. In childhood, malnutrition occurs in at least 30 per cent and malaria, anaemia, diarrhoeal disease, acute respiratory infection, hypothyroidism, tuberculosis, parasite infection, injury and accidents are major problems.

Our visit gave us some insight into the challenges faced in the delivery of health care in the Province. There is a high level of dependence on free health care; inadequate funding for equipment and medications; an inadequate number of trained staff; and lack of access to simple diagnostic methods. The health workers were most impressive but had few opportunities for post-graduate education. They battle daily without what we would regard as basic equipment (eg infant sized resuscitation bags-and-masks) and drugs (eg oxytocin).



The Hoc Mai medical team in Dien Bien Phu



Health care is restricted by the wide range of ethnic minority groups in the province, each with a different language and different cultural practices and beliefs and low levels of literacy, which are barrier to health promotion.

One night we were entertained at a local village with a feast and traditional dancing. We were “invited” to sing to the crowd and did an abysmal rendition of Waltzing Matilda, while one of the group hopped about in kangaroo pose. Perhaps the most memorable meal we had was in a roadside café 50km up country from Dien Bien Phu. It was most disconcerting to be presented with dog — there were hot dog and cold dog dishes on the table — when there were live dogs (one suspiciously without a tail) running about under the table fattening up on the scraps!

We are particularly grateful to the Vietnam Women’s Union; Prof Liem from the National Hospital of Paediatrics; Prof Mai from the Ministry of Health; Mr. Pham Hoang Be, Vice-President of the Dien Bien Province People’s Committee; Mr. Nguyen Van Bien, Vice-Director

#### Project team

**A/Prof Elizabeth Elliott (Project leader), University of Sydney and Children’s Hospital at Westmead**

**Ms Cathy Adams, Westmead Hospital, Sydney**

**Dr John Hall, Department of Public Health, University of Sydney**

**Prof Heather Jeffery, University of Sydney and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney**

**Prof Jonathan Morris, University of Sydney and Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney**

of the Dien Bien Department for Public Health; and Dr Merel Mattousch from the WHO.

There is much to be done at all levels to address the high rates of maternal and infant mortality in Dien Bien Province. There are opportunities for Hoc Mai to assist in the training of health workers and provision of basic equipment and drugs.

## The student perspective

Eight second-year medical students from the Northern Clinical School won scholarships to Vietnam funded by the Myer Foundation and the RSL. This is how two of them found their experience.

### Postcard from Hanoi by Emma Skowronski

When we got off the plane in Hanoi and crammed nine people and their luggage into five seats in a small van, I knew we had arrived in a world quite different from home. Eight second-year students were granted Hoc Mai scholarships this summer, to go to Vietnam and experience a different perspective on health care.

We threw ourselves into Hanoi with enthusiasm and vigour, keen to engage with all aspects of Vietnam — especially the food! The old wives’ tale that says not to swim directly after eating has been discarded. We were ready to dive in, bellies full all the way.

As our first weekend of fun together came to a close, we were faced with the daunting prospect of our first exposure to third world hospitals. Pip and Shih-Ling headed down to Hue while Kathleen and Jess were off to Danang. I was left here in Hanoi with only Anthony and Phil to protect and Emily to comfort me. The culture shock was yet to come.

For the first fortnight the boys walked around the corner to Viet Duc Hospital, a large surgical hospital in central Hanoi. Emily and I had to peddle for half an hour across town on our rickety bicycles in



Emma Skowronski (right) and Emily Patrick at the National Institute for Pediatrics

peak hour traffic to Bach Mai Hospital, a general medical hospital big enough to get lost in... several times.

Emily and I experienced neurology, endocrine and geriatric medicine and rehabilitation. I was disturbed to see that most wards had two or even three patients to a bed and a serious shortage of nurses meant that most patient care was provided by the family, many sleeping on the hospital grounds, under the stars, in order to be nearby. The actual medical care was, in my admittedly limited opinion, a pleasant surprise. Cost is always an issue over here but there is always access to CTs, Xrays and MRIs when needed. Even the medical students, all required to do one night shift a week from year 3 to 6, seem to know so much. The Paediatrics hospital has provided one of our most interesting experiences so far. As one might expect, the most advanced medical care we have seen so far was for the kids. We spent a morning in surgery, Emily assisting in the repair of a meningocele. We watched a couple of patent ductus arteriosus repairs, the modern equipment whirring and the doctors explaining the details of the technical procedure with admirable patience. We watched two fathers recuperating from two of the first kidney transplants in the hospital, performed by visiting French doctors. The rehabilitation unit was impressive and Emily, a physiotherapist, was pleased to see allied healthcare in action for the first time. Speech therapy, play therapy and physiotherapy intersected with acupuncture and electrical therapy. In the neonatal unit they have 35 beds but often 70–80 patients. It was a real experience.



Kathleen with one of her patients in Danang

### **Postcard from Danang** by Kathleen McGrath

My initial reaction upon arriving in Danang was a considerable degree of culture shock. I thought Hanoi was relatively undeveloped, but Danang is different from anywhere I have been before.

The hospital experience was amazing. I spent the first week and a half in the Obstetrics and Gynaecology department. Here, I was not only able to observe procedures and examinations, but also the cultural beliefs and practices related to women and childbirth.

On my first morning, I was invited to watch a hysterectomy. It was difficult as I watched the anaesthetist attempt a spinal tap six times before he was actually successful. The whole time, the woman had minimal pain relief and was physically wincing with the pain, yet refused to utter a sound of distress. The tolerance and stamina of the patients, particularly the women, is so admirable but very difficult to comprehend. Many of the procedures and sanitation related to surgery are unbelievable. Although my experience of theatres from home is relatively limited, I still found so many things different. There are open-toed rubber shoes for surgery, severe shortages of equipment and drug supplies, outdated anaesthetic machines and little recognition of occupational hazards such as needlesticks.

The last week I was placed in the neurosurgery department, which has an insightful and valuable experience. Spare afternoons saw us venture to the Cardiology, Neonatal ICU and Paediatric wards. Each of these areas touched us in a different way and shown us new and invaluable insights into the Vietnamese people and their culture.

Our first visit to the Neonatal ICU broke my heart. There were about 30 babies in total, many sharing cribs with another baby and covered in inadequate, even threadbare cloths. Five babies lay in the three available humidicribs, with the facemasks that were supposed to be covering their eyes for protection lying around their necks — useless. As the two nurses on duty attended to the other 25 babies or so, it is not surprising that this went by unnoticed.

Despite the fact that all the babies were precariously small and fragile, there were two in particular that wrenched at my heart. The first one, the nurse dragged me over to have a look at, avidly pointing and gesturing at her own face... I looked into the baby's face and surely enough, where one of its eyes should have been was just a sunken depression of skin. The baby's head extended back into an elongated, multiple series of small spherical structures, covered in skin and hair (an encephalocele). This is completely preventable if the mother has enough folate in her diet.

This baby epitomised many of the challenging things we have had to face in our time here in Danang. We were given an invaluable insight into the reality of life and health care systems beyond Australia and the developed world.

The exposure has fostered an understanding and passion to help that will now remain with me forever. I would like to sincerely thank the Hoc Mai and Myer Foundations for providing me with such an amazing experience.

## Medical exchange program expands

Hoc Mai welcomed ten doctors and nurses from Vietnam to Sydney in 2004. This is the greatest number the exchange program has hosted so far.

The doctors included:

- Dr Le Van Chi, an endocrinologist from Hue Medical College
- Dr Nguyen Minh Hung, a cardiologist from Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi
- Dr Ho Thi Kim Thanh, a gerontologist from Hanoi Medical University
- Dr Nguyen Trong Hung, a neurologist from Bach Mai Hospital, Hanoi
- Dr Le Van Minh, a cardiologist from Danang Hospital
- Dr Vo Thi Dieu Hien, a paediatrician from Hue General Hospital who also lectures in Nursing at Hue Medical University
- Dr Phan Hong Viet, an oncologist from Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City
- Dr Pham Gia Khai, an orthopaedic surgeon from Viet Duc



The main 2004 group at their farewell

The nurses included Mr Nguyen Anh Son from Bach Mai and Mr Nguyen Tien Thanh from Viet Duc who, along with Dr Hien, attended courses at the College of Nursing. Hoc Mai wishes to thank Prof Judy Lumby who organised a comprehensive program, including visits to the major metropolitan hospitals as well as district hospitals.

The doctors and nurses worked in various departments at Royal North Shore and were fortunate to do a Cardiac Arrest and Medical Emergency course in the Northern Clinical Skills Centre.

The main team arrived in early June and spent three months in Sydney where they lived in a share-house in Greenwich. This is the first time the visitors have been self-catering. It meant they were able to shop at the markets and cook their own Vietnamese food — which they shared with RNS colleagues.

What impressed them most about working at Royal North Shore Hospital? “The team culture. There are always meetings and formal discussions where experience and knowledge can be shared,” said Dr Thanh of her experience.

## Hanoi fundraiser



Four of the Students with Ambassador Joe Thwaites and his wife Loma

The Australian business community got together for their annual Christmas celebration in Hanoi at a fundraising dinner aid of Hoc Mai.

About 200 people, including visiting staff from the University of Sydney attended the Australian dinner at the Sheraton Hotel. Thanks to the efforts of the Senior Trade Commissioner Tim Gauci, all the Australian produce including salmon, beef and wine was donated.

The night also featured a breakdancing routine by a group of energetic Hanoian

youths — evidence that hip hop culture is alive and well in Vietnam.

The event raised \$5,200 for Hoc Mai Australia House at Viet Duc Hospital. Additionally, the Australia New Zealand Group in Hanoi donated a further \$6,500. This amount will fund the ANZ Education Room, to be built as part of the House. Hoc Mai wishes to acknowledge the tremendous support of Simone Fairhead in organising the dinner, and Senior Trade Commissioner Tim Gauci for organising sponsorship.

## College assists nurses

by Judy Lumby

The College of Nursing has established a professional development program for Vietnamese nurses who are brought to Australia under the auspices of the Hoc Mai Foundation.

This support is pro bono and the Board and staff at The College have a commitment to what they see as their global outreach in terms of developing the profession and improving health outcomes.

Last year, the College supported one doctor who teaches nurses in a BN program at Hue University and two registered nurses from Hanoi. The study programs ranged from two-day courses in Models of Care to a week-long course in Infection Control.

Despite some learning difficulties, the College program was very successful and we are keen to continue as the Nursing Education arm of Hoc Mai.

The selection of candidates for the program will be critical as most learning will be gained by those who enter our country with a good level of English.

Professor Judy Lumby is the Executive Director of The College of Nursing

## Help with trauma care

Two Primary Trauma Care Courses were held at Viet Duc Hospital in Hanoi in December run by Dr Marcus Skinner, a specialist anaesthetist from Tasmania and Professor David Hill, a PTC instructor from Sydney. The courses were run with support from the ASA Overseas Aid Sub-committee.

Trauma is the biggest health problem in Vietnam. It is estimated that the road toll exceeds 10,000 per annum. Road traffic collisions are currently the second greatest cause of mortality, motorcyclists accounting for 80 per cent of the victims. There is no coordinated (Pre-hospital / Hospital) response system for trauma victims as exists in Australia, Europe and North America. The health care budget is small and medical facilities, communications and transport systems for the sick and injured are poorly developed.

The PTC Team worked in conjunction with the local Vietnamese including Professor Ha Van Quyet, Director Viet Duc Hospital, Dr Nguyen Duc Chinh, Chief of the Department of Septic Surgery, Professor Nguyen Thu, Head of the Department of Anaesthesia and

Critical Care (who is President of the Vietnamese Society of Anaesthesiology) and Dr Nguyen Huu Tu, Anaesthesia and Critical Care Course Co-ordinator at Hanoi Medical University.

Fifty-two candidates completed the courses, which highlighted the need for early recognition and intervention for life threatening conditions using the minimum of equipment. The courses teach the basic knowledge and skills necessary to identify and treat traumatised patients who require rapid assessment, resuscitation and stabilisation of their injuries. In particular the courses used the basic principles of trauma resuscitation and management, adapting them to the local conditions and giving responsibility for the teaching and administration of the course to local medical staff.

The first PTC course was taught predominantly in Vietnamese with English presentations being translated using Dr Tu and Dr Chinh as translators.

A further PTC course and instructor course is planned in conjunction with the ASAEN Congress in Anaesthesia in November this year. Dr Skinner hopes that provincial PTC courses can be held in Haiphong and Danang in 2006 in addition to further courses in Hanoi.

While in Hanoi, the PTC team met Prof Don Nutbeam, Pro Vice Chancellor Health Sciences and Professor Bruce Robinson, Hoc Mai Chairman.

## First impressions

by Alicia Afuang

Working for the Hoc Mai Foundation, and being involved with its many undertakings, has been very rewarding. In early December I was fortunate enough to see first-hand the progress of our projects in Vietnam.

It was great to finally meet the people with whom I have liaised in the two and half years working for the Foundation, yet only ever corresponded with by e-mail and letters. It has given me a chance to build better working relationships for the future. I was also able to visit Hanoi Medical University on the morning of the interviews of the 2005 scholarship candidates. They were an enthusiastic bunch and I look forward to welcoming them in Sydney next year.

My tour of Viet Duc Hospital later that same day was somewhat confronting. It gave me a brief insight into the health care system of a developing country, which was a stark contrast to what

I have seen at Royal North Shore Hospital. Yet it seemed even with the challenges of inadequate resources, Viet Duc was able to help its patients and ease their suffering. This reinforced to me the importance of Hoc Mai's continued work in improving medical education and health care in Vietnam, and what a privilege it is for me to be able to play my small part in it.

My trip also gave me the chance to experience, and be amazed by, different aspects of Vietnamese life and culture. Perhaps my most enduring impression from Vietnam is the vitality, strength and forward direction of its people.

I read that this has been the first full decade in almost two hundred years that Vietnam has not been fighting a war. Vietnam at the end of 2004 is testament to the industrious nature of its people.

(Alicia Afuang is the Hoc Mai Administrator)

## Rotary aids hospital project

Sydney Cove Rotary presented Bruce Robinson with a cheque for \$15,000 this month which will be used to fund the pilot infection control project at Viet Duc Hospital.

The money was raised at the 10th annual Rotary Charity Regatta held on the harbour in November. The proceeds of the regatta, one of the biggest organised in Sydney, were shared with the Sydney Children's Hospital. The Regatta has raised well over a million dollars for charity since it was started.

More than 50 yachts took part in the charity day hosted by the Cruising Yacht Club in Rushcutters Bay. Among the Hoc Mai supporters who sponsored yachts were the North Shore Private Hospital which took their night staff out for a Christmas treat, the Moulty Agency and Pathfinders who also used it as a Christmas celebration for staff.

Her Excellency, Prof Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales, was the special guest of Club President Geoff Appleton.

Hoc Mai wishes to thank the Regatta organisers Bob Bruce, Rob Taggart and Bill Little for their excellent event.

## The year ahead

### AGM

February 24th, 5.30pm  
Norman Nock Lecture  
Theatre, RNSH

### Hoc Mai student scholarship

Applications close June 3rd

### 2005 Vietnamese scholars

arrive July

### Hoc Mai Dinner October

Rotary Regatta November

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Log on to the Hoc Mai Foundation  
website [www.hocmai.org](http://www.hocmai.org)