

HEALTH

Visiting Doctors To Perform Surgeries, Provide Vital Training

By Erik Wasson

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There is only one heart surgeon in Cambodia but periodically the doctor at the Phnom Penh Heart

Center gets a colleague.

This week, cardiac surgeon Dr. Jonathan Chen and a team of nine other doctors and nurses from the US are performing 10 open-heart surgeries at the center and training staff how to perform less invasive procedures.

“The idea of Surgeons of Hope is to perform cardiac surgery. But it is also to train staff on simple procedures that can make a real dent in the urgent need for cardiac care.” Chen said Monday, referring to the group that brought the medical volunteers to Cambodia.

During its visit, the Surgeons of Hope team focused on children in need of heart procedures – those who have what are known as congenital heart problems.

Congenital heart problems are defects in the heart muscle or blood vessels a person has from birth.

“Given a population of 13 million, pediatric cardiologist Dr. William Hellenbrand said Monday, “you could expect a need for

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-- Dr. Chin Visal,

PHNOM PENH HEART CENTER ADMINISTRATIVE CHIEF

1,300 congenital heart procedures alone, and no one is really doing it.”

According to Heart Center statistics, an estimated 10,000 children in Cambodia need critical cardiac surgery and 100,000 children nationwide suffer from heart disease.

Dr. Chin Visal, the center’s administrative chief, says the center performs about 30 surgeries on patients each month.

The signs of heart disease in children are difficulty breathing, eating and growing.

“Sometimes the patient will appear blue from lack of oxygen in the blood,” Hellenbrand said as a 5-year-old patient entered the room. Her face was violet in color, her lips sky blue and she took short shallow breaths.

Hellenbrand is training local staff to perform several catheterization procedures during this week long stay. Catheterization procedures involve the insertion of a small tube, usually with miniature tools on its end, into an artery. The tube is then

pushed toward the heart and blockages can be removed or holes repaired. “It is our hope that we can leave some of the technologies and techniques that we know so that they won’t have to rely on foreign doctors one day,” he said.

Many of the diseases, such as one known as the Tetralogy of Fallot which involves a hole in the lining of the heart, are 90 percent fatal over 20 years but can be cured using a quick procedure.

The lack of heart specialists in Cambodia was not surprising to the visiting doctors, most of whom had traveled to the developing world before.

“There are so many people dying from diarrheal disease or malaria here that it is likely difficult to prioritize diseases like those we are treating,” Hellenbrand said.

“Here it is the survival of the fittest.... Many of the childhood heart diseases we see in the US simply don’t exist here because the children do not survive infancy.

Cambodia’s infant mortality rate of 124 deaths per 1,000 births is one of the highest in the world and is triple the average for East Asia.

The Phnom Penh Heart Center was set by the French NGO Chain of Hope in November 2001. Chin Visal said that before that, all heart patients were flown abroad for treatment.

“This work is important. Forty percent of our patients are poor and do not pay for the surgery,” he said, urging more teams to come and help treat the huge backlog of patients in need here. “There are some small things we can do, but big things, like open heart surgery, we need foreign doctors to help.”

The 10 person team from the US is the largest so far, but almost every month a surgeon from abroad arrives for a short stay.

A parent with an ailing child can take the child to Phnom Penh’s Calmette Hospital or directly to the neighboring Heart Center for evaluation. The center is located at 3 Monivong Boulevard.