

## Newsletter 18

Newsletter posted 1 August, 2007

### Severe Dengue Fever Epidemic

In my last newsletter I mentioned that many exciting things have been happening but I'm afraid they are still going to have to wait until another newsletter as I want to tell you about the very severe dengue fever epidemic Cambodia is currently experiencing. (Many countries in this region are also suffering from dengue fever outbreaks at the moment.)

I don't want to bore you with statistics but this is the worst dengue fever outbreak ever seen here and there are some pretty startling figures (you can read more detail further down). Briefly, so far this year there have been 22,099 reported cases and 259 deaths. This is a 94% increase on last year which only had 16,649 reported cases and 158 deaths for the entire year, and the rainy season is far from over. (You have to wonder how many cases go unreported, too.)



**Why have I dedicated an entire newsletter to dengue fever? Is it a call for donations? No. I'm telling you because I know that this is receiving very little media attention in the West and because these children and poor people don't have a voice. But they deserve to have their stories told.**

Experts say that early monsoon rains and heavy migration are spreading the mosquito-borne virus, while some also blame the authorities for not acting quickly enough to control the outbreak. The outbreak actually started some time ago and is expected to worsen during the wettest months of the year, August and September.

Hospitals around the country are overwhelmed with sick children, and staff and resources are stretched to the limit. The shortage of blood for transfusions, needed in case of complications, is also a major concern.



*The crowded admissions/waiting area.*



*Waiting to be treated.*



*Due to the huge number of patients, sick children sleep in corridors on straw mats.*

*These 3 photographs kindly supplied by Angkor Hospital for Children.*

Cambodia's public health system remains rudimentary, with much of its funding coming from foreign aid. According to the World Bank, annual government spending on health is only about \$3 USD per person.

Illness burdens families and affects their livelihoods. Having a sick child can plunge families living in poverty into an even more dire situation. It means someone has to stop work to take the child to a health center or hospital. It means paying the transport cost to get to the hospital, medicine costs, and loss of income while at hospital. This is why some people will take their children to the hospital only when it is too late.

Singapore, which is a very well developed and affluent country, is also suffering from a dengue fever outbreak. The difference in Singapore though, is that when a person presents at a hospital with dengue fever it is reported to the government who immediately go to the area where that person lives and treats the area for mosquitoes to prevent any further problems. Dr Beat Richner, the director of Kantha Bopha Children's Hospitals says that hospitals here in Cambodia also report to the government but very little is done. On the other hand, if a case of bird flu is identified, the government will go the very next day and "neutralize" the area. **WHY? WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE? Far more children are dying of dengue fever than bird flu. The difference is that bird flu threatens those of us in the West, in the developed world, while dengue fever only threatens children in poor countries.**

**WHAT IS DENGUE FEVER?** Dengue fever is a virus spread by mosquitos. Amongst other things, it causes high fever, joint pain, rashes and in severe cases haemorrhaging.

**HOW DO YOU GET DENGUE FEVER?** The dengue fever virus is spread by the “tiger” mosquito (so named because of its stripes). The tiger mosquito bites during the day and breeds in dirty water. The mosquito transmits the disease by biting an infected person and then biting someone else.

Because the mosquito bites during the day sleeping under mosquito nets doesn't help prevent it.

**IS IT FATAL?** There is no specific medicine for dengue fever but early diagnosis and treatment can prevent complications and death. It causes high fever and haemorrhaging and although adults get it, it mostly kills children under the age of 15.

The most severe form of the virus is dengue hemorrhagic fever or dengue shock syndrome, which can prove fatal, particularly in children. This is also why the hospitals are asking for blood donations. Without blood transfusions many children won't survive.

**HOW TO STOP/PREVENT DENGUE FEVER** The only way to stop/prevent dengue is to destroy the mosquito's breeding grounds. They breed in dirty, stagnant water. This is why educating people to clean any receptacles that collect or hold water is so important.

### **IS DENGUE FEVER IN PRASAT CHAR VILLAGE ?**

Yes, we have dengue fever in Prasat Char. We know of at least six children who have had it or currently have it. Of course there could be more that we don't know about.

In fact, Brian Kuhl, our volunteer from Darwin , Australia , who I mentioned in the last newsletter, got dengue fever. He ended up spending six days in hospital in Siem Reap then went back to Australia earlier than planned to recuperate. Thankfully, he is on the mend now.

### **WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT IT?**

The very first thing we did was teach all our children about dengue fever. We spent an entire day on dengue fever education. We covered such topics as how you get it, symptoms, what to do if someone has it, how to clean up any dirty water to prevent the mosquitoes from breeding, etc. Our plan was to teach the children all we could about dengue fever and then send them home to educate their parents.

When we discovered the epidemic was worsening we decided to take further action in the form of a concert to educate the adults. First we had to educate the village leader and his assistants. They knew surprisingly little about it.



We then put Mr Hong, a new Helping Hands part time employee, in charge of producing a play that would get the message across to the people. We told him on Friday night that we wanted to hold the concert the following Tuesday night, a very short time frame. He did an outstanding job. The children were instructed to go home and spread the word about the concert throughout the village.

One of the villagers had received some training on dengue fever from the Red Cross so we invited her to come and speak at the concert.





We started the concert with the children doing some songs, including the national anthem. We then did the play, which really got the message across, this was followed by the Red Cross trained villager and Chanti talking further about dengue fever, and finally there was some more singing and dancing at the end (as well as an official thank you to Koren from Adelaide, who had been volunteering with us for July).

The concert was amazingly successful. Many, many people turned up for it – it was hard to tell how many there were in the dark, but I reckon there was at least several hundred. And they all had a great time. It went so well we intend to do more concerts in the future when we want to tackle other issues.

#### ANGKOR CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

The Angkor Children's Hospital is doing an amazing job (it is not a government hospital, it was originally founded by a Japanese photographer) and operates with donated funds. We'd like to thank them for providing some of the photographs in this newsletter. If you are visiting Siem Reap don't forget to visit them and donate your blood – it will save a child's life. You can find out more about them at: [www.angkorhospital.org](http://www.angkorhospital.org)



(Here's Koren giving her life saving donation.)

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

"Fatalities stemming from a dengue fever outbreak continue to rise reaching 259 by July 26 with 22,099 cases reported. The outbreak is not only limited to Cambodia but is prevalent throughout the region." (I wonder how many cases don't make it to medical facilities and hence go unreported.) Phnom Penh Post, July 27, 2007.

14 days ago the Phnom Penh Post reported 182 deaths and 14,986 reported cases. (For the same time period last year there were only 4,308 cases and 48 fatalities.) Furthermore, in comparison, last year the total for the entire year was only 158 deaths and 16, 649 cases.

"In May, the Angkor Hospital for Children treated 219 cases compared to only 10 for the same time period in 2006. In June, dengue numbers reached 723 cases, 678 more than last year – a staggering 94% increase." Phnom Penh Post, July 13, 2007

In fact, in June alone, the Angkor Children's Hospital admitted 271 children suffering from dengue fever (and treated many others as outpatients) which was more than the entire number of dengue fever cases admitted to the hospital for all of 2006. The hospital is obviously struggling to accommodate all the children and many now lie on straw mats in the corridors.

The Kantha Bopha II Children's hospital director, Dr Beat Richer, says that 25% of all admissions at the moment are Dengue Fever cases. He says it is the most severe outbreak ever seen. The Phnom Penh Post also reports that this year has seen the highest number of severe dengue infections ever reported.

"Dr Beat Richner is the director of Kantha Bopha Children's Hospitals. He says the authorities did not act quickly enough to prevent the disease. "We gave all addresses of all patients to the Ministry of Health so they could go, and they should go there, together with the WHO (World Health Organisation) to neutralize the breeding places but unfortunately nothing was done until the month of June, and then I made announcements in the newspapers and outcries and now they start, but it's too late." VOANews.com, 27 July, 2007.

#### IN THE NEXT NEWSLETTER

As I keep telling you, many exciting things have been happening, I just haven't had time to elaborate on them yet, but stay tuned as I'll do so shortly. Some of the things I'll be talking about

are: solar power for our school, new uniforms for all our students, medical help for villagers, and our wonderful volunteers and donors.

Information and data in this newsletter has been gathered from: The Phnom Penh Post, The Angkor Hospital for Children in Siem Reap, Dr Beat's concert at the Kantha Bopha II Hospital in Siem Reap and [VOANews.com](http://VOANews.com)