

Vietnam Dental Volunteer Work

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Photo Credit: David Leyes

Dr. Sangeeta Wylie is a general dentist, and has been a clinical instructor/guest lecturer at UBC and University of Toronto's Faculties of Dentistry. She is active within organized dentistry and volunteers in the non-profit sector. Outside dentistry Sangeeta is an actor, playwright of an award-winning play, and a published poet. This article chronicles her recent trip to Vietnam to treat children born with cleft lip and palate.

In November 2022, a delegation of multi-disciplinary, specialized healthcare professionals volunteering with Vancouver-based Planet Smile for Kids Society (PSK) led by Dr. Sandra Fastlicht, and partner organization Smile Train (ST), travelled from Canada, Mexico, and the Philippines to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam to provide education, training, and equipment related to the treatment of Cleft Lip and Palate (CLP).



Examination of Vietnamese baby with cleft lip, prior to fabricating a Nasoalveolar Molding (NAM) appliance

Inspiration, Agent Orange & Superstition

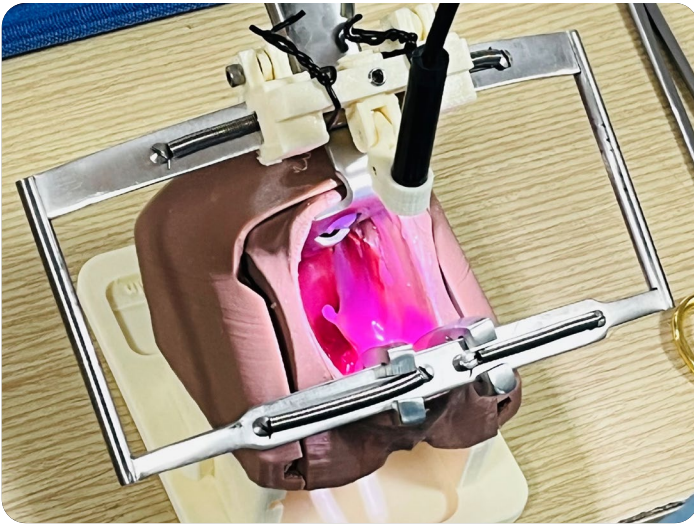
My interest in CLP in Vietnam was catalyzed by writing a play, *we the same*, inspired by a true story of Vietnamese oceanic refugees, often referred to as The Boat People. Down the research rabbit holes, I read of several journalists and scientists investigating the topic of CLP in Vietnam, the most profound of whom was the inimitable Christopher Hitchens, who penned an article for Vanity Fair in 2006 entitled *The Vietnam Syndrome*. In it he lays bare the high prevalence of birth defects in post-war Vietnam. To this day, the causes are a political hot button centred around genetics, environment and the infamous use of

lethal herbicide Agent Orange during a war that ended nearly fifty years ago. What is indisputable yet likely underreported, is this: one in 500 Vietnamese babies are born with cleft lip and palate every year. The Canadian comparable ranges in articles: one in 750-1,000 babies. Set side by side with populations, the divergence increases: annually, 3,000 babies in Vietnam contrasted with 500 in Canada.

There is another difference between the two countries, rooted in awareness and traditions of superstition. As Hitchens witnessed in 2006, many Vietnamese babies were abandoned or given up to orphanages, as parents, often unaware that the condition was treatable, attributed the presence of CLP to bad luck or bad karma. Whether given up for adoption or kept at home, the costs of surgeries were prohibitive and clefts went untreated for the most part. These babies became adults who learned to live with a life of pain and stigma, owing to conditions that affected eating, speech, hearing, and social integration.



Simulare Medical Cleft Surgical Workshop with participant surgeons from Southeast Asia.



Simulare Medical 3D Model of palate used in Workshop, invented by Dr. Dale Podolsky

Teamwork, Training & 3D Technology

Over the last couple of decades Vietnam has welcomed teams of foreign health professional volunteers who perform CLP reconstructive surgeries. PSK and ST have uniquely championed and developed a sustainable, team-based care model which empowers healthcare professionals in Southeast Asia to provide awareness, multi-disciplinary treatment and on-going professional training. In partnership with The National Hospital of Odonto-Stomatology (NHOS) in Ho Chi Minh City, a comprehensive CLP Centre has been established and continues to evolve. This includes founding the *Annual International Congress for Cleft lip, Palate and Craniofacial Deformity*. Last November marked the third Congress after a two year, COVID-19-enforced pause. Over four days, activities included scientific lectures, workshops, demonstrations, round table discussions, simulation exercises, and treatment in a teaching environment in the disciplines of Dentistry, Orthodontics, Plastic Surgery, Orthopedics, Speech Pathology, Audiology, Nutrition, Nursing, and Dental Lab Technology.

Dentistry is a remarkable field that provides opportunities to expand our knowledge, to collaborate, to grow professionally, to improve the provision and quality of care, and to give back in a myriad of ways.

This year, Vietnamese surgeons were trained in using a patented Simulare Medical 3D model from Smile Train for CLP surgery, newly invented by Cleft and Craniofacial Pediatric Surgeon-Scientist Dr. Dale Podolsky, of Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto.

Supporting Communities, Erasing Stigma

Building on the knowledge that had already been transferred in previous years, we witnessed significant progress in the local team's skills and interrogations. From a social standpoint, many

parents attending a Caregivers Workshop had an opportunity to find community, and to ask questions related to CLP and home care. My involvement centred around interviewing families and documenting their experiences pre- and post-treatment. Most encouraging was an increasing level of awareness, especially in rural communities, of the available treatments being offered for free, leading to improved quality of life for affected children and families. These parents have become grassroots advocates for the cause by sharing their ordeals and guiding other families to get the care they need. This is a significant advancement in removing a stigma that formerly made the topic taboo. Also heartening: stemming from Hitchens' article, a few of us toured a local orphanage, sponsored by Vancouver-based Vietnamese businessman and former refugee, Dan On (Dan-D Pak). Of the ninety children who live there, only one presented with cleft palate.

Volunteerism: A Gift That Gives Back

One of the favourable outcomes of global volunteer work is strengthening international professional relationships and collaboration, and reciprocal learning. In addition to the work with NHOS and the Congress, our team participated in the first Ho Chi Minh City International Dental Exhibit & Conference (HIDEC), which took place from November 11 to 13. The Vietnamese organizers provided outstanding hospitality with welcome dinners, a formal opening event replete with acknowledgements and cultural performances; and lectures enabled with language translations via headphones. Through dentistry, we broadened our global horizons and cultural perspectives, making our vast world feel a little more connected.



HIDEC Conference, Front row seated L to R: Dr. Angelina Loo, Dr. Manuel Yudovich, Dr. Eduardo Garduño, Dr. Sandra Fastlicht

Dentistry is a remarkable field that provides opportunities to expand our knowledge, to collaborate, to grow professionally, to improve the provision and quality of care, and to give back in a myriad of ways. For those interested in the mission of Planet Smile for Kids, please visit planetsmileforkids.org. ■

The opinion(s) and/or perspectives raised in this article is/are not an official position of the BCDA.

Photos courtesy of Dr. Sangeeta Wylie.