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—Warunee Punpanich



She Leaves Her ‘Comfort Zone’ to Train in Fighting HIV

AS A PEDIATRICIAN PRACTICING in one of Thailand’s largest children’s hospitals, **WARUNEE PUNPANICH** reached a point after seeing so many HIV-infected patients that she decided merely treating them wasn’t enough.

Warunee’s facility, Children’s Hospital in Bangkok, has treated more than 1,000 cases of symptomatic HIV-infected children since 1989, with more than 4,000 cases of infants born to HIV-infected mothers. “These children are our future, and the response to the problem indicates how highly we value that future,” she says. “We have to regard every case of HIV infection that is diagnosed in a child as a failure of preventive measures in adults. I decided it was time to step out of my comfort zone and find a more efficient way to deal with this problem.”

Her response was to enroll in the UCLA/Fogarty AIDS International Training and Research Program, based in the School of Public Health. The program, founded and directed by Dr. Roger Detels, provides master’s- and doctoral-level epidemiology training to health professionals in Southeast Asia, China, and other parts of the

world, helping to prepare them to return to leadership positions at their home institutions. At Children’s Hospital in Bangkok, which serves a mostly indigent population, Warunee will be the first physician fully trained in epidemiology.

“We are a very large hospital with lots of data about diseases and patients, but we don’t know how to make use of it,” she explains. “In this age of information overload, my colleagues and I didn’t have the proper skills to critically analyze the data and turn it into knowledge that would help give our children a better quality of life.” Instead, she says, the hospital’s clinicians tend to rely on knowledge gained from Western medical literature, which is not always applicable to their setting. “We have limited resources, so using the most expensive technology is often not an option,” Warunee says. “And the health problems are so much different in my country. Rather than following others, in Thailand we need to learn how to take our own body of knowledge and use that to inform practice. By learning epidemiology, I can do that.”

Warunee is near completion of her doctoral coursework and plans to return to Thailand this summer to complete her dissertation, which will explore factors affecting the quality of life and well being of HIV-

infected children in Thailand. Among other things, she hopes to develop a model for when and how to disclose HIV diagnosis to a child. “A lot of HIV-infected children in Thailand now survive into adolescence, but many are unaware of their own diagnosis,” Warunee says. “It’s very painful for the parents to share this information, but it’s important because as the children get older we need to empower them to take full participation in the treatment process.”

She calls the UCLA School of Public Health program an “eye-opening” experience. “It has provided me with a new level of understanding of the role of the scientific method in generating a valid body of knowledge,” Warunee says. “In the pursuit of this knowledge, and through the network of important contacts I have made here with my colleagues from different countries, I hope to expand my perspective and contribute to making a difference through the application of evidence-based medicine and public health principles.”