

From Clinical Practice to a Big-Picture Approach to Tackling Thailand's Health Problems

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF CLINICAL PRACTICE in rural Thailand – the last two as director of a community hospital in Chiang Rai Province, the country's northernmost region – **PANITHEE THAMMAWIJAYA** was growing frustrated.

The province, heavily populated by refugees from bordering Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, was plagued by a poor hygienic environment, contributing to an endemic problem with infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Although most of his friends were content to continue treating patients, Thammawijaya concluded that he could make more of an impact in public health.

"There were more patients coming in every day, every month, every year," he says. "As a clinician, I was helping them one by one, but it didn't seem to make a difference in the population. I realized it would be more effective to prevent people from getting a disease, and that being an epidemiologist – the backbone of public health – was a way I could do that."

So Thammawijaya went through the two-year Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) at the Thailand Ministry of Public Health, then stayed on to work in the ministry's Bureau of Epidemiology as a medical epidemiologist and FETP faculty member. In 2007, after a year in that position, he received a scholarship to further his education at the UCLA/Fogarty AIDS International Training and Research (AITRP) Program under the leadership of Dr. Roger Detels, professor of epidemiology at the School of Public Health.

The UCLA/Fogarty AITRP helps to build capacity at key institutions leading the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in a number of Asian countries, including Thailand. The FETP, which conducts outbreak investigations in Thailand with a scope similar to the Epidemic Intelligence Service of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and also helps to train others in the region, includes several senior members who are UCLA/Fogarty alumni. "In addition to my own work as a medical epidemiologist I am training medical doctors from my country and from Lao, Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia," Thammawijaya says. "I need the best epidemiological knowledge to do that, and that's why I chose to come to UCLA."

Thailand was an important success story in the fight against HIV/AIDS, having responded swiftly at the outset of the epidemic to establish an early-warning "sentinel surveillance" system (with assistance from Detels and one of his former trainees) and implementing bold strategies such as requiring brothels to ensure condom use by every client. But the characteristics of the epidemic have changed over the last decade. "Ten years ago it was mostly confined to men who have sex with men and commercial sex workers, but now other parts of the population are getting infected, which makes our work more challenging," says Thammawijaya.

Thailand is also dealing with emerging infectious diseases at the same time that old ones such as tuberculosis and malaria continue to cause havoc, and chronic health problems such as cardiovascular disease and obesity grow in severity. Thammawijaya looks forward to returning to the FETP to apply the knowledge he is gaining at the school toward tackling these and other concerns. "We are very fortunate in our region to have the opportunity to study with Dr. Detels and the UCLA program," he says. "It is making a big difference in our work."



"There were more patients coming in every day, every month, every year. As a clinician, I was helping them one by one, but it didn't seem to make a difference in the population."

— Panithee Thammawijaya