Erasing Borders
Forging Ties

The spread of HIV/AIDS, the emergence of bird flu, the threat of pandemic – these are just a few of the public health crises facing Vietnam and its neighbors.

Nhium Viet Luong of Vietnam’s Thai Binh City has a plan to help his country deal effectively with these threats. A second-year master’s student in maternal and child health at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Public Health, Luong is learning how to teach others how to avoid these diseases.

“If I can provide people in Vietnam with a knowledge of public health issues, I think I can help to prevent and defend against disease,” says Luong who plans to pursue a doctorate in public health at the UNC School of Public Health. “In my country,” he says, “people think a person who is fat is healthy and a person who is thin is weak. Older people cannot understand how anyone could ever be too fat.”

Following graduation, Nguyen said he plans to return to his teaching position at the Hanoi School of Medicine, where he hopes the knowledge gained at Carolina can be passed to others there and used in his research.

The relationship isn’t only one way: UNC students also travel to Vietnam to offer aid and learn about the region. Last summer, for example, 12 UNC students (including four from the UNC School of Public Health) traveled to Vietnam to participate in an eight-week Gardner Field Research Seminar where they learned about the history, culture, and current challenges in education and public health in the country.

Such collaborations enhance the educational experience of both Vietnamese and U.S. students, says Dr. Trude Bennett, an associate professor of maternal and child health at the UNC School of Public Health, who co-led last summer’s seminar along with Howard Machtinger, director of the UNC-Chapel Hill Carolina Teaching Fellows Program in the School of Education.

“Student exchange is important for both countries, as is collaboration between public health schools,” says Bennett who has been developing collaborative exchanges with the Hanoi School of Public Health for several years now. “Vietnamese students learn the U.S. approach to public health training and teaching methods while U.S. students benefit from being immersed in another culture and witnessing the ingenuity and resourcefulness used to address health problems in a less developed country.”

Students participating in last summer’s Gardner Field Research Seminar worked in field placements with governmental and non-governmental organizations in Vietnam. They also studied Vietnamese language and culture, attended public health seminars and conducted site visits throughout the country to learn about health conditions.

“The experience knocked a lot of reality into me,” says Andrea Yuen, a UNC School of Public Health undergraduate senior majoring in nutrition who took part in the seminar. “The problems are so great. I have a much greater respect for people in the field of public health.”

Yuen, who is considering studying medicine, had the opportunity to shadow a Vietnamese doctor specializing in tropical diseases. She said that the experience helped her recognize her interest in preventive medicine.

“The Vietnamese hospital had all this expensive diagnostic equipment, but it didn’t have basic sanitation to help prevent potential infections which could worsen a patient’s condition,” she notes.

Reden Sagana, a second-year master’s student in the School’s Department of Public Health who is from Hanoi, Vietnam, agrees that education is key to improving health in Vietnam where obesity is becoming increasingly prevalent while under-nutrition remains a significant problem. “In my country,” he says, “people think a person who is fat is healthy and a person who is thin is weak. Older people cannot understand how anyone could ever be too fat.”

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Burgeoning international activities

In a world where nations and economies are increasingly connected — whether through economic globalization, ongoing demographic changes, or environmental accidents or catastrophes — ill or good health in any population affects everyone.

It’s with this perspective that the Carolina School of Public Health’s Office of Global Health coordinates and supports the School’s and the University’s many global health activities, including research, teaching and service projects.

“Providing a global health perspective means emphasizing mutual information and cultural exchange among researchers, policy-makers and health personnel in different countries to address the myriad public health challenges of the world,” says Associate Dean for Global Health Dr. Peggy Bentley. “HIV/AIDS, malaria, SARS, tuberculosis, cancer and obesity are just a few of the issues that affect or have the potential to affect people in every country on the planet.”

The Office identifies funding opportunities and helps develop proposals both independently and with UNC faculty engaged in global health research. It supports cooperative partnerships with investigators and institutions worldwide, develops formal internship and fellowship programs for students, hosts a monthly global health seminar series, works closely with a dynamic Student Global Health Committee, and offers a Global Health Certificate to graduate students wishing to learn more about global health, CARE International and UNC graduate program and strengthened its graduate training program. Bentley and Bennett have also worked with Hanoi faculty to develop a research agenda that could foster long-term collaboration between students and faculty at the two schools.

Bennett, along with Dr. Peggy Bentley, associate dean for global health at the UNC School of Public Health and professor of nutrition, has built other Vietnamese connections with Carolina. In recent years, they served as technical consultants to the Hanoi School of Public Health, which implemented a new under-

Office of Global Health coordinates

“Our goal is to work toward applied intervention research among topics of relevance to Vietnam and internationally in the areas of reproductive health, maternal and child health, and nutrition.”

UNC’s campus partners in the Framework Program for Global Health include the Schools of Public Health, Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry, Pharmacy, and Journalism and Mass Communication; the College of Arts and Sciences; the Provost’s Office; the Student Global Health Committee; the University Center for International Studies; the Carolina Asia Center; the Institute of African Studies; and several interdisciplinary centers, including the Carolina Population Center, the Carolina Environmental Education Foundation (VEF) fellows. The grant is one of 12 Framework Programs for Global Health grants issued to U.S. and foreign universities by the Fogarty International Center, the international component of the NIH. It will create the UNC Framework Program for Global Health.

“The new UNC framework program will bring together a diverse set of formal partners on campus and engage local and international research organizations, including Family Health International and RTI International, and collaborators in South Africa, Malawi, India, Russia, Peru and Chile, in the development of multidisciplinary educational and research opportunities with a global focus,” Bentley said.

Among other things, the new grant will send two UNC faculty members and four UNC graduate students to teach and study in the Malawi-Carolina Summer Public Health Institute in Blantyre next summer, a program funded by another UNC Fogarty Grant.

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Last fall, the Office received a $400,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health to support the “Malawi to U.S. Student Exchange Program,” which will enable students to participate in an interdisciplinary study of global health issues. The grant is one of 12 Framework Programs for Global Health grants issued to U.S. and foreign universities by the Fogarty International Center, the international component of the NIH. It will create the UNC Program Framework for Global Health.

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For more information about the Office of Global Health, visit their Web site at www.sph.unc.edu/ogh/.

- By Emily Smith