

Erasing Borders Forging T



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.

Nhiem 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 Carolina before returning to his teaching position at Thai Binh Medical University.

Luong is one of seven Vietnamese students at the Carolina School of Public Health this year with the same goal in mind – learn, and take the knowledge home to improve their country's future.

Tuan Nguyen, a second-year doctoral student in nutrition at the UNC School 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."

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

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BY SUBHASHNI SINGH JOY

PHOTOS BY HOWARD MACHTINGER

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 ►►



PHOTOS: (Above) A mother and her children spent time together in their home in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam; (Below) Howard Machtinger and Dr. Trude Bennett hold language diplomas next to the bust of Ho Chi Minh. The two UNC professors took a Vietnamese language course at the Saigon Vietnamese Language School during the summer of 2005 when they were in Vietnam co-leading the Gardner Field Research Seminar; (Bottom) Dancers perform in the Citadel at Hue, the old royal capital of Vietnam.





PHOTOS:

(above) Tuan Nguyen of Vietnam is one of 211 international students studying at the UNC School of Public Health. (right) From left, a student from the Public Health Faculty of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, celebrates in an intercultural reception in Vietnam with UNC students participating in the 2005 Gardner Field Research Seminar: Andrea Yuen, Judy Pham, Ingra Schellenberg, Janet Lopez and Josh Glasser.



► Health Policy and Administration who participated in the seminar, said the cultural classes provided perspective in the ways that culture impacts Vietnamese lifestyle.

“There were things I didn’t realize or that got lost, in terms of culture, until I took the cultural classes,” says Sagana, who worked with CARE International

during the seminar to improve workshops designed to educate home health caregivers in caring for people with HIV/AIDS.

The UNC School of Public Health’s collaborations with Vietnam over the past few years have been numerous. In January 2004, Bennett went to Vietnam as part of an American and Vietnamese team

of public health experts who interviewed the first cohort of prospective Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) fellows.

VEF was established in 2000 to fund Vietnamese graduate students for the study of science and technology in the United States. Begun as a means to convert Vietnam's payment of war debt

Bennett, along with Dr. Peggy Bentley, associate dean for global health at the UNC School of Public Health and professor of nutrition, have 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-

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into a scholarship fund, its purpose is to build a cadre of professionals who will be leaders in Vietnam's developing science, engineering and public health communities. Seven Vietnamese students presently studying at Carolina are VEF fellows.

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.

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

The continuing effort is ultimately to strengthen ties between the Carolina School of Public Health, the Hanoi School of Public Health and other Vietnamese public health colleagues with the goal of equipping the next generation of public health leaders — both in the U.S. and Vietnam — with the tools needed to address emerging public health challenges.

These efforts seem to be working.

Tuan Nguyen says the analysis skills he's learning at Carolina will enable him to apply more advanced statistics in his research and use internationally accepted research standards. As a bonus Nguyen, who has written nutrition and health articles for Vietnamese newspapers and Web sites for the past five years, adds that he plans to continue the practice and through it, continue to improve the public health of his country. ■