

Letter from Thailand

Sense of identity as a family physician

Applying the four principles of family medicine in a remote Thai village

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Four years ago, I worked as the sole doctor and director of a 10-bed district hospital in a remote area of northern Thailand with a population of 15 000. My time there coincided with the appearance of the first AIDS cases in that community and the beginning of the current epidemic in the same area.

A 33-year-old Thai woman came to the district hospital with a fever and dyspnea of 4 days' duration. She was a poor and illiterate woman from a small remote village of northern Thailand. When I was an academic fellow in family medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario, I learned the four principles of family medicine.¹ As a Thai physician, I remembered these four principles when I treated this patient.

The family physician is a skilled clinician

I initially diagnosed the woman with acute community-acquired pneumococcal pneumonia. On the first day of admission, she rapidly became more distressed, although her chest x-ray film was only slightly hazy and non-localized in one lower lung. I realized then that this woman had an atypical form of



Practising the four principles of family medicine:
A remote area of northern Thailand, population 15 000.

pneumonia. I referred her to the provincial hospital, from which I did not get a referral letter back.

One month later, the woman returned to the district hospital with pneumonia again. That led me to call the provincial hospital and request information about her previous hospitalization. I was informed of her results, but I was not sure whether she knew about her HIV status. In my experience, many large hospitals screened for HIV without informing patients. She did not want to return to the referral hospital with her second bout of pneumonia because her village was very far away, and traveling was inconvenient for her and her family. So I treated her in the district hospital.

The patient-physician relationship is central to the role of the family physician

During counseling, she revealed that she was a prostitute. I recognized that my attitude toward her profession might interfere with our relationship. I tried to understand her experience of illness as well as I could and respect her need for privacy. I understood her difficulty in dealing with such a stigmatized condition in a small community. It

came as a surprise when she chose to follow up with me instead of the more distant and anonymous provincial hospital. I developed a stronger and healthier relationship with her and her family as time went on.

As a result of our relationship, she became my teammate in a public education program on AIDS. She accepted my invitation to speak to the hospital staff (many of whom were leaders in the community) to increase awareness, knowledge, and empathy toward people with AIDS.

It was a very effective method of building trust with patient, family, and the community. After her talk, my team and I saw the healing

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power of her presentation and the support she received from her community. As a result, she could be weaned off oxygen therapy, walked more steadily, and behaved with more confidence and spirit. I took care of her until she passed away a year later.

Family medicine is a community-based discipline

After I treated this patient, the community became fearful of the hospital as an AIDS institute. I promptly started the information program beginning with the district hospital staff and then with other community leaders, such as the sheriff, the police, teachers, students, and the head of each village. I told them to expect more cases of AIDS because, as a result of poverty, many women earned their money through prostitution in big cities such as Bangkok. Many men and women still engaged in risky sexual behaviours.

We surveyed the community's knowledge about AIDS (which highlighted many misunderstandings) and planned our community education program. It was very difficult to promote use of condoms in households because using a condom was viewed as a symbol of mistrust. We tried to convince the people to have safer sex and contraception at the same time. Although villagers knew the benefits of condom use, they were too shy to ask for them from health workers in the village. We opted to provide free condoms in open boxes outside the village health centre so that villagers could pick them up any time, as many as they wanted, without anyone knowing. There was a very thin line between confidentiality and community safety.



Practising the four principles of family medicine: *Public education program for AIDS—increasing awareness, knowledge, and empathy.*

Developing confidential team care in such a small community became very challenging. The team determined the criteria for referring patients to the appropriate places.

In order to develop a positive environment for AIDS care, we set up a series of conferences to update knowledge of AIDS and promote an empathetic attitude toward patients with AIDS and their families. Specialists encouraged me to refer patients to the provincial hospital where there were appropriate investigations and drugs available. They did not know what to offer AIDS patients in such a small community hospital, where there were only a basic laboratory and medicine.

Based on patients' needs, I practised in coordination with the provincial hospital to obtain their support. After developing trust with patients and the coordination team, I arranged for patients to receive regular home visits by health workers in the village. Patients would be referred from the village whenever appropriate.

During follow up and admission of my first AIDS patient to the district hospital from time to time, I prepared her and her family for the end of life. Counseling her and her husband was not as challenging as counseling her two daughters, ages 9 and 11 years, to accept the imminent death of their mother. Providing palliative care for this family was not limited to the team. All hospital workers helped support them as well. That made palliative care easier than I anticipated. All hospital workers and I went to her funeral in her village to show our respect to her and her family. This event was instrumental in raising awareness and acceptance of AIDS in the community. Two years later, 38 new cases were identified in 13 families.

The family physician is a resource to a defined practice population

Because of the delay in obtaining results from the referral hospital and an expectation of many more new cases of AIDS

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in the community, I considered having an HIV kit and counseling clinic in the district hospital to provide quicker and more accessible care to patients. My team had to deal with the problem of developing a confidentiality protocol in such a small community. Two nurses were selected and trained to work in the counseling clinic. We used a secret code for the HIV test, and a technician was blinded to the patient's name. We also developed confidential team care among the health care centre, the district hospital, and the provincial hospital. The team studied the epidemiologic data on AIDS cases in the community by mapping and studying the population at risk. We made a surveillance record, and I kept a complete record of each patient encounter, including the information from the provincial hospital. I contacted the provincial public health centre for their epidemiologic data and for their supports, including educational materials and a list of resource people.

To update my practice, I went to conferences about AIDS treatment and palliative care, consulted many specialists, and searched for information about non-governmental organizations that work for AIDS in Thailand. In addition to chart audits with the staff in the provincial hospital, I reviewed and planned for AIDS care, for individuals and families, with my team.

Conclusion

Learning about the four principles of family medicine in Canada gives me value and a sense of identity as a family physician. I can distinguish roles in providing comprehensive, patient-centred care differently from those of other specialists. These roles are not taught adequately in medical schools

in Thailand. Many Thai general practitioners feel inferior to specialists in providing primary care in the community. This might be the first time in Thailand that we have recognized general practitioners' role as patient advocate by identifying with the four principles of family medicine in Canada. ♦

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Editor's note: This relates the experience of Dr Hathirat. Drs Talbot and Byrne assisted Dr Hathirat in developing the case for teaching the four principles of family medicine and in planning workshops on participatory action research (collaboration between family physicians and the community).

Reference

1. The College of Family Physicians of Canada. *Residency program accreditation and certification*. Mississauga, Ont: The College of Family Physicians of Canada; 1997; p. 5-7.

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