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**Swiss doctors mend bones, bring hope**

Eleven-month-old Dinh Quang Nam was born without shinbones and with two toes missing from each foot. Despite this disability, he is going to learn to walk using prosthetics – like many other disabled children who are cared for by two Swiss orthopaedic specialists, **Miriam Glass** reports.

The little boy rests his head on his mother's breast, falling asleep immediately. Dinh Quang Nam is exhausted after showing off his new skills. Watched by everybody in the room, the 11-month-old toddler stood up on his own two feet. A moment which is special for every kid, but unbelievable given Nam's disability. Due to a birth defect, Nam does not have shins and only has three toes on each foot.

When his mother Mai visited the hospital with him last year, she did not dare to believe that he might stand unassisted one day. Nam has been wearing his newly manufactured prosthetics for two months now, and his mum is excited.

"I am looking forward to seeing him walk," Mai says, and that dream might just become a reality.

"Nam's chances are very good," says Daniel Hueskes, an orthopaedic technician from Switzerland who, together with orthopaedic surgeon Claude Mueller, has travelled to Viet Nam twice a year since 2003 to treat patients like Nam.

The two Swiss specialists work closely with VIETCOT, the Vietnamese Training Centre for Orthopaedic Technologists in Ha Noi, and with the Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Centre for Handicapped Children Bac Thai in Thai Nguyen Province. Here they met Nam and his family for the first time last October, and they plan to monitor his treatment and discuss the next steps with local staff every six months.

Mueller and Hueskes examine and operate on patients selected from various hospitals across Viet Nam, but they also teach their Vietnamese counterparts how to use new techniques, how to produce artificial limbs and how to operate on patients with difficult conditions.

Duong Van Su, a 27-year-old farmer belonging to the Tay ethnic group from the province of Tuyen Quang, is preparing for surgery. When he was eight years old, his left knee started to hurt – today it is swollen to an abnormal size and it is impossible to stretch the leg. Su can stand, but he cannot work in the fields like his brothers and will have even more problems if nothing is done about it, says Mueller, who will perform the operation with a team of local doctors.

"We work very well together, since the standard of education in VIETCOT is high," says Mueller. "However there are still things Daniel Hueskes and I can teach them, since a lot of specialist medical literature is not available in Vietnamese yet."

Pham Thuy, Vice-Director of the Centre for International Training Co-operation at VIETCOT, agrees, saying: "Viet Nam's system of rehabilitation centres is good, but there is a very large number of disabled people in the country and we do not yet have the capacity in terms of finance and knowledge to help all of them. Moreover, orthopaedic techniques in Europe are one step ahead of Viet Nam, so we profit immensely from the input of specialists like Dr Mueller and Dr Hueskes."

The patients should profit most from the work – Su will probably be cured after the surgery and he will not have to pay for it. However, not everybody who comes for a consultation can be assured of a better future. Mueller looks carefully at the very thin, crooked legs of a teenage boy and takes a deep breath: "We can try surgery, but we cannot promise that he will be better afterwards."

And just a little later on, he is stretching and bending the legs of a one-year-old baby who was born without kneecaps. "I don't think I can do anything for him," Mueller says.

Later, he and Hueskes talk about the sadness they feel when they realise there's nothing they can do –



**Exam:** This man has a deformed foot because he stepped into a fire as a child and did not get the right treatment afterward. Doctor Daniel Hueskes suggests that he undergo surgery. — Photos Miriam Glass



**Moving forward:** The staff at Vietcot make a plaster mold for a patient.



**Hope awaits:** Patients with different types of disabilities wait to be called into the consultant's room to meet doctor Mueller and doctor Hueskes at Vietcot.



**Careful observation:** Doctor Claude Mueller looks over the X-rays of a patient in Vietcot.



**Giant steps:** Nam has no shinbones due to a birth defect, but now he is able to

Disability facts

According to the population and housing census of April 2009, there are 12.1 million disabled people in Viet Nam, accounting for 15.5 per cent of the population over five years of age.

Of these, 33 per cent or 3.9 million cases have problems with their vision, 20 per cent or 2.5 million cases have hearing impediments, 24 per cent or 2.9 million cases have mobility problems, and 23 per cent or 2.8 million cases have problems with their memories.

The disability rate stands at 7.1 per cent for men and 8.5 per cent for women, while 6.5 per cent of urban and 8.4 per cent of rural populations are affected. The rate increases according to age, from 1.1 per cent in the 5-9 age group to 72.3 per cent for 80-year-olds and older.

but also of the joy when they can help children or see Vietnamese doctors dealing with difficult cases after studying new techniques.

stand up thanks to his prosthesis.

The work of Mueller and Hueskes is financially supported by the Green Cross Switzerland, a non-governmental organisation that aims to help communities overcome the damage caused by industrial and military disasters.

Around US\$30,000 is raised by the Green Cross and the two doctors themselves for every visit. The money is spent on medical workshops and the treatment of roughly 80 patients per year, who are selected from various hospitals in the catchment area of VIETCOT in Ha Noi and the centre in Thai Nguyen.

Many of the selected patients are suffering from congenital defects. "We are often unsure about the reasons for these disabilities," says Mueller. However, he and Hueskes assume that many of the defects are likely to be the consequences of the war in Viet Nam.

"We know that many veterans who came into contact with Agent Orange had children with birth defects," says Hueskes.

Agent Orange was a defoliant sprayed over Viet Nam by US forces between 1961 and 1971. It contains dioxin which is said to be the most toxic substance ever produced by man.

According to US scientist Jeanne Meager Stelman, between 2.1 and 4.8 million people in Viet Nam have been exposed to the substance. Even the third generation after the war suffers the consequences, says Professor Tran Xuan Thu, spokesman for Viet Nam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA). "It is now known that dioxin acts like a hormone. It gets to the receptors in the cells of a developing foetus before the normal hormones and directs the cells to do abnormal things."

However, people are reluctant to talk about Agent Orange, even if it is one of the causes of their pain – the only thing important is how to relieve the agony. As Mueller says: "For us it is important to help, no matter if some kid falls off a motorbike or has a birth defect caused by Agent Orange."

He still sees a relation between his work and the war: "The war has destroyed the infrastructure and the healthcare system – we try and help to improve it."

He himself has a close relationship with Viet Nam's history: His American cousin was one of the GI's that sprayed Agent Orange over the country.

"My mother used to say that nowadays, I help to clean up what he was doing," Mueller says, with an uncomfortable look on his face. "Maybe she is right."

His colleague Hueskes was asked to work in Viet Nam by the Green Cross given his experience in treating disabled children. He was one of the leading specialists who dealt with the consequences of the Contergan scandal in Germany in the early sixties. At that time, many pregnant women had taken the sleeping pill Contergan without knowing that it would harm their unborn children.

The patients and their families have no idea why the two Swiss doctors come to Viet Nam – and they don't ask.

After waiting for hours in front of the consultancy room, they just want to be told if they will be cured soon. Some of them leave full of hope and joy, like little Le Thi Hoang Nguyen, a six-year-old who was born with a missing forearm and is looking forward to getting a prosthetic limb next week.

Others go away unsure, like the teenager with the crooked legs who has to think about the risks of complicated surgery with no guarantees it will make him better. And some come back for follow-up examinations, like Tran Thi Ngoc Diep. Mueller performed surgery on the six-year-old in 2010 to try and correct her crooked legs that were preventing her from walking. Now she shows up to VIETCOT, standing proud on two straight legs, walking with no difficulties, like a little miracle.

"Moments like this are the reason we come back again and again," say both Mueller and Hueskes – and they hope that one day soon, they will see Nam walking like Diep – with the help of two little artificial feet. — VNS