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Training Program Focuses On Treating Swallowing Disorder

BY LAUREN CROTHERS | AUGUST 9, 2014

In a small room in the Neurology Department of Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital on Friday morning, four doctors marked a special day, becoming the hospital's first staffers to receive certificates in how to evaluate and treat swallowing problems.

The certification followed two months of intensive training led by a visiting American speech therapist who saw a dire need for more focus to be placed on speech and swallowing disorders in Cambodia.

Despite a lack of hard data, anecdotal evidence points to a wider, largely underserved issue, and something the doctors here come across regularly—particularly among patients who have suffered strokes or serious head trauma.

“We know stroke patients can have problems with swallowing,” said Dr. Teav Veasna.

“It can cause pneumonia, or people can become dehydrated or choke—it's been very important for us to learn how to treat this problem,” he added.

Help came in the form of Elizabeth Chafcouloff, a speech and language pathologist and founder of Speech Therapy Cambodia, an NGO set up last year to address the need for this specific therapy in Cambodia.

“Ultimately, we want to set up a program for Cambodian speech therapists,” she said ahead of the certification ceremony.

She said the group also wants to set up a speech and language clinic.

Dr. Proum Chhoeun said the training had been crucial in helping him work with not only patients, but their families, too.

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“We learned a lot,” he said. “Now we can reduce complications and chances of mortality.”

He and Dr. Veasna were chosen, along with neurologist Chhour Channara and physiotherapist Tuy Samrach, to take part in the training by the head of the department, Dr. Navuth Chum.

For now, such training programs are largely informal in the absence of a dedicated speech therapy program in universities.

“It was difficult near the end of the training,” said Dr. Channara, “but now we are ready.”

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