

## Cover Story

**DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS****Doctors here investing and doing volunteer work in region**

Dr Leslie Lam (left), who has been doing voluntary service in Myanmar for more than 10 years, being received by the Myanmar chairman of National Health Committee Secretary I, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt (centre).

**DOCTORS** without borders. Angels of mercy. Asian Peace Corps. Increasingly, these are the inspiring labels that some Singapore doctors are making themselves available for.

Since 1992 -- the year the volunteer wave, spear-headed by the Singapore International Foundation, began -- at least 30 home-grown doctors have opted to do itable work in the region.

In the most recent trip of this nature in February, a delegation from Mount Elizabeth Hospital spent about a week performing free operations and training doctors and hospital technicians in Myanmar.

The delegation comprised of cardiologist Dr Leslie Lam, cardio-thoracic surgeon Dr Joseph Sheares, general surgeon Dr Mohan Chellapa, gastro-enterologist Dr Vincent Kwok and paediatric cardiologist Dr Chan Kit Yee.

Last November, a team of 30 top Singaporean doctors and surgeons such as Dr S.T. Lee, head of plastic surgery at Singapore General Hospital and Dr Ho Tew Hong, head of the department of gynaecological oncology at Kandang Kerbau Hospital, performed surgery and delivered lectures in Yangon in a transfer of expertise.

Myanmar is just one of the many regional countries this growing Singaporean brigade of healers aim to bring medical succour to. Other beneficiaries are the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Indonesia.

So successful have these mercy missions been that, sometimes, Singaporean doctors have shown themselves as good, if not better than, well-established missions from the West.

Take a recent mission to Myanmar by a group of doctors from London's famed Hammersmith Hospital, for instance. Out of five open-heart surgeries performed by

the British team, only four were successful. Compare that with the Singapore team's record over the past few trips: more than 20 open-heart surgeries -- all successful.

In recognition of their work, the Myanmar government has appointed Dr Lam and Dr Sheares as honorary consultants to its Ministry of Health and a recent visit by Dr Lam was carried on the national newspaper's front page.

But lest it be thought that such deeds are mere gestures by rich doctors needing the odd professional diversion, here are more instances of home-grown volunteer work to show the idea has taken root here:

■ In 1992, three teams of 12 volunteers went to the Philippines to provide dental care for victims of the Mount Pinatubo disaster.

■ In 1990, cardiac surgeon Dr Saw Huat Seong led a pioneering team to Beijing to help establish coronary surgery there. He has also done volunteer work in Xian and Xiamen.

■ In 1994, Normah Medical Centre in Kuching approached Dr Saw to help establish a cardiac programme there. The programme was launched in December last year with volunteers such as cardiac surgeon Dr Saw and cardiologist Dr Richard Ng.

■ For the past 10 years, Singaporean ophthalmologists have been making mercy trips to China, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Just a few weeks ago, the foundation stone for an eye centre in Tianjin was laid.

According to Professor Arthur Lim Siew Ming, medical director of the Singapore National Eye Centre, it will be the leading centre in China and Singapore is the main contributor to this project.

■ Next month, Dr Ronald Yeoh, visiting consultant

to the Singapore National Eye Centre, will lead a team to Shandong province, China, to train the medical staff.

■ Since 1992, specialists like plastic surgeon Dr Fong Poh Him have travelled to Myanmar and China to perform about 100 operations on hare-lipped children.

■ Since 1992, doctors have made regular mercy trips to Indonesia to help children suffering from physical defects. The hare-lip and cleft palate surgery specialists include anaesthetist Dr Rachel Pereira, 43, who has made five trips so far.

Although shy to admit it, she typifies many of her ilk who volunteer their services for altruistic reasons. "I felt I had to give back to the community what it had given me in such abundance," says the mother of three.

**Although shy to admit it, anaesthetist Dr Rachel Pereira (right) typifies many of her ilk who volunteer their services for altruistic reasons.**



Altruism aside, there is no denying the valuable experience that working under spartan conditions as a volunteer affords, as Dr Jovina Tseng said before she went on a three-month stint to Cambodia in 1993.

"In going to Cambodia, I would be depending not only on my skills but also on my instincts. That is really important in my line as an anaesthetist" she said.