

HEART DOCTORS



At hand: Dr. Leslie Lam (left) and Dr. Aung Kyaw Zaw in the \$2-million laboratory for heart patients in Myanmar.

Picture/
ALVIN TOH

It is business that drives profit-minded Singaporeans to Myanmar these days. But for one group of doctors, it's a matter of pure heart -- and it's not just for Christmas

CARDIOLOGIST Leslie Lam's client-list reads like Who's Who of the region -- it includes the Sultan of Brunei, one of the world's richest men.

Yet, Dr. Lam, 52, is in one of the world's poorest countries, striding the paint-peeling corridors of an old Yangon hospital.

"It's great to feel that you are one of the pioneers here, like the US Peace Corps years ago. There's satisfaction in spite of the circumstances. Things are too easy in Singapore," he says.

Challenge and a mission to help Myanmar doctors "leap-frog" into the present, after years of isolation, have motivated other Singaporean doctors to join league with Dr. Lam over four years.

All their services have been offered free.

The result:

- Cardiac, endoscopy and anaesthetic units have been developed with their help,
- Almost 30 open-heart surgeries, each costing over

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— Dr. Leslie Lam, on working as a volunteer in Myanmar.

\$20,000, have been performed without fees and

- Equipment worth \$10,000 and \$45,000 has been donated on each trip.

Since Dr. Lam's first visit in 1991, a Singapore team -- comprising specialists, nurses and technicians sponsored by Mount Elizabeth Hospital -- has regularly returned for week-long rounds of consultations, surgery and training.

Dr. Lam, who runs a private specialist practice like most of the team members, says: "Everyone who comes, in fact, loses one whole week of earnings."

Heart surgeon Dr. Joseph Sheares made it clear this was no "feel-good" mission to show off the doctors' skill.

"The most important thing is that the doctors here can carry on without us, with the expertise and training we've given them," said Dr. Sheares, 52. He is the son of late President Benjamin Sheares.

(Dr. Sheares and Dr. Lam are appointed advisers to Myanmar government hospitals.)

Myanmar cardiac surgeon Dr. Tin Mueang Aye, 40, said: "Other visiting teams do a demonstration, we just watch, and when they leave, things are just like they were before."

"the Singapore doctors let us do everything with their help. That way, we draw from their experience."

Said Dr. Sheares: "Every few months we come, we see an improvement in the management of patients -- from diagnosis, to treatment, to intensive care."

Summing up the team's feelings, gastroenterologist Dr. Vincent Kwok, 46, said: "We have played a role in this stage of a country's development. No money can buy this kind of feeling."

'From Stone Age to Space Age'

DR. AUNG Kyaw Zaw laughs now, recalling the blackout at the time he had a patient on the operating table.

The 49-year-old Myanmar cardiologist said: "He was stuck in between the machines. I had to grab for his pulse and ask him if he was okay!"

Such were conditions when the Singapore doctors first arrived in Myanmar. Dr. Vincent Kwok found "no running water, no electricity, no trolleys" in the room where he was to set up a unit.

"The place was like Singapore's Tan Tock Seng Hospital 20 years ago, when I was a student," he said.

The Myanmar hospital had bought modern machines -- but the team found them stored away as no one knew how to operate them.

Today, the change is like moving "from the Stone Age to the Space Age" said Dr. Leslie Lam. The hospital's own

I wouldn't be so happy if you gave me a basket of diamonds. God sent the Singapore doctors to cure his disease.

— Madam Hln Tha Kyi, 72, to The New Paper, about the successful operation on her husband, Hla Shwe, 75. During the latest visit in end-November, the team was given a chauffeured car, beach holiday and government guest-house lodgings -- treatment usually given only to VIPs.

generator takes care of the blackouts. Hi-tech medical centres have been set up.

The Myanmar doctors are almost ready to take off on their own.

Dr. Lam said: "The Myanmar cardiac team can handle all except the most complex cases. Just one more year,

one more visit -- our job here is almost done."

But the Singapore doctors feel they have also learnt a lot from their "bright" Myanmar counterparts -- such as tapping their experience with diseases like malaria.

Heart surgeon Dr. Joseph Sheares said: "In developed Singapore, we don't see so many grave illnesses. The time will come when, because they see a wider spectrum of patients who are much more ill, they can also teach us."

PROBLEMS FACED

■ **Engineers.** "We can buy machines, but we need people to maintain them," said hospital commandant Tin Thein Lwin, who aims to be on par with the region's hospitals in three years' time.

■ **Vaccines and equipment.** "They need Hepatitis B vaccines especially," said Dr. Kwok, who hopes Singapore donors will come forward.

By YVONNE LIM