

MATICHON INFORMATION CENTER		Subject Heading :	
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		2	

Princess' legacy of help for rural poor

Mobile teams of medical volunteers treat people in remote areas

■ Story by APIRADEE TREERUTKUARKUL

■ Photo by APICHART JINAKUL

Pramukh Chandavimol, secretary-general of the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteer Foundation, recalls the time when he joined the project more than 30 years ago.

"The image of Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana walking behind the Princess Mother through remote terrain to meet villagers who were waiting for healthcare treatment is still fresh in my mind.

"Throughout their lives, both worked hard to improve the quality of life of Thais. Their inspiration is the main reason that I am still here," he said.

The late Princess Mother was concerned about the health and welfare of rural people. In 1964, on a trip to visit villagers and inspect the operations of the Border Patrol Police, she decided to launch the volunteer project to help people in need who had poor access to medical services.

Since the project started in 1969, the foundation has played a unique role in providing health services to poor people in remote areas.

It is a recognised pioneer in delivery of health care using mobile medical teams and radio medical teams.

Most of the volunteers are government officials and each team comprises two doctors, one dentist, one pharmacist, two nurses and two assistants. The operation has been extended from 48 to 51 provinces after Princess Galyani Vadhana took over responsibility as the foundation's honorary president in 1995, shortly after the Princess Mother died.

Dr Pramukh said dental problems are a big health concern among villagers in remote areas, apart from general illnesses.

Although the national health care system is better now compared to the 1960s, the medical volunteer project started by the foundation still plays an important role in improving dental care for rural people.

Chief of Phayao Provincial Public Health, Chamnan Hansuthiwechakul, who has served as a doctor volunteer for the project since 1980, recalls one time when hundreds of villagers from Umphang district of the Thai-Burmese border province of Tak walked in heavy rain from mountainous villages to welcome the volunteers and receive treatment.

"Villagers, from elderly to the very young, turned up early in the morning to receive

the princess and the volunteer team. They came not for the free treatment, giveaway toys or clothing, but to get a glimpse of the Princess and the Princess Mother," he said.

Apart from toys, first-aid drugs, clothes and food for villagers, the princesses also brought gifts such as medals, pins and plaques for volunteer staff to give them moral support.

Dr Chamnan said he still keeps a plaque which he received from the Princess at his office.

Dr Samroeng Yaengkratok, head of Nakhon Ratchasima Provincial Public Health Office, said the Princess used to sing with rural doctors and health staff to relax after a hard day's work.

The princess also sang with staff on one of her last trips in 2005, to Narathiwat's Bang Lang dam.

He said volunteer doctors will continue to play a vital role even though the primary health care system has improved.

"There is still much to be done, especially in treating specific conditions such as hare lip, lip-cleft-palate and rheumatic heart diseases," he said.

At the foundation's initiative, he has also conducted a health promotion campaign for the elderly.

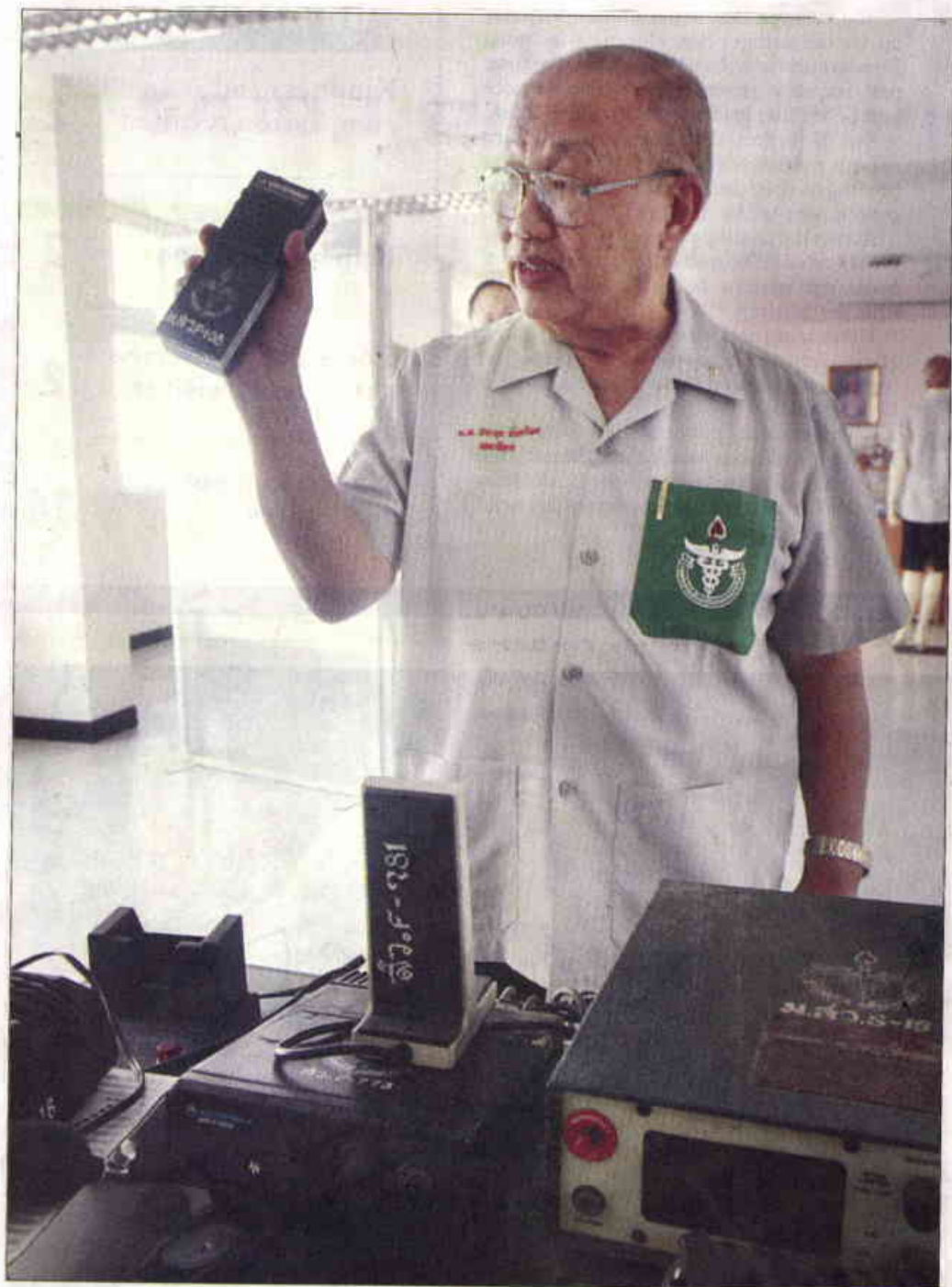
About 30,000 elderly in Nakhon Ratchasima have joined the project, which encourages people to live healthily by doing exercise and eating nutritious food.

"We will always follow the will of the Princess, carrying on the Medical Volunteer Project for the poor in remote areas. Our good deeds are a tribute to His Majesty the King and the Princess," he said.

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PRAMUKH CHANDAVIMOL

SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE PRINCESS MOTHER'S MEDICAL VOLUNTEER FOUNDATION



Dr Pramukh: Dedication shown by HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana gives him inspiration.