

MATICHON INFORMATION CENTER		Subject Heading :	
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DR THERDCHAI CHEEWAKET HAS PIONEERED THE PRODUCTION OF LOW-COST ARTIFICIAL LEGS RELYING ON CHEAPER AND EVEN RECYCLED MATERIAL.

WALK OF LIFE

The Prostheses Foundation imparts artificial-leg-making skills to foreigners

By Thanapat Kitjakosol

DAILY XPRESS

After 17 years of making low-cost prosthetic legs for those in need, a foundation under the patronage of the late Princess Mother is training foreign workers to master the skill.

Assoc Prof Dr Therdchai Cheewaket, secretary-general of the Prostheses Foundation of Her Royal Highness the Princess Mother, is a veteran himself, being the country's top maker of prosthetic legs. A Magsaysay laureate, he has pioneered the production of low-cost artificial legs relying on cheaper and even recyclable material.

The foundation began to expand after the late Princess started funding Therdchai's production on learning of his dedication when he served in the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteer Foundation she founded. The foundation has been operating for 17 years and now supervises 16 factories.

Legs for 18,000 people

The foundation has produced 24,000 legs for about 18,000 people.

A training programme for foreign makers began early this month after authorities in the Republic of Burundi made a request for its workers' to be trained in making and

repairing prosthetic legs.

The skill is needed following a high number of injuries and numerous amputations resulting from a civil war in that country. The training will end in December, and they will work in a government project, which still needs funding of around Bt1 million through donations from the international community.

Training overseas workers

The Prostheses Foundation has also trained Indonesian workers following fighting in Aceh province. Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia are the other countries which have sent people here for training.

Even without wars, Therdchai says, prosthetic legs are always in high demand across the globe for amputees who lose a

leg in accidents or to diabetes.

He says that 24,000 prosthetic legs produced by the foundation has saved around Bt312 million after using local materials which are cheaper.

Therdchai graduated from medical school in 1965, and has worked as a bone surgeon since. He developed an interest in making prosthetic legs after his amputated patients imported them - at high prices - from abroad. He began his research and sought local materials from Chiang Mai.

The locally made legs are around Bt4,000 - half the cost of those imported. The cheapest product made by the foundation is part of an artificial leg below knee level, which costs Bt700, because it is made from abandoned drinking yoghurt plastic bottles.