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HIV/AIDS scenario on the early 1990 in Thailand

In the early 1990's some foreign agencies started to monitor the spread of the new HIV infections in Thailand. Several preliminary surveys were done and found that there was a potential problem. There were a total of 500,000 estimated infections in 1992, most of them in the northern provinces of Thailand. In the brothels in Chiang Mai, 44% of the working girls were already infected. The new infection rate was rampant and could reach 100,000 new cases per year.

I remember that time because I was a resident at the Camillian Hospital, a non-profit hospital run by our foundation based in Bangkok, when we received a confidential letter sent to all the hospitals in Thailand. This letter informed us that an estimated 2.000 people from all over Thailand, with clear symptoms, had already developed AIDS.

Health care leaders invited the hospitals to take care of these patients, without referring to the National Communicable Disease Hospital being too congested. They were trying not to announce it publicly to avoid negative responses from the tourist business and tarnish the public image of the country.

Mr. Michai, a well known senator, started a really good and tough campaign in favor of the use of condoms and made it to be as much familiar as possible among the Thai people. He and his people have been working hard up to nowadays with excellent results.

A lot of educational activities done by NGOs, the involvement and good participation of the civil society, a strong policy in closing and keeping brothels under control, and several other events helped Thailand to overcome the "disaster".

In 2007, we have an estimated 1.200.000 HIV positive all over the country with an increasing rate of 17.000 new infections per year. ARVs are provided to more than 100.000 people under the health care scheme, and positive attitudes help to accept HIV positive people in their families

and in the work places. Hundreds of HIV/AIDS associations are spread all over the country doing advocacy work; several religious and private institutions are taking care of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) that have been abandoned and are dying and of orphans living with HIV.

1990 - 1995

Knowledge of the virus and the attitude towards PLWHA at the government and social level was very negative and lacking. Nobody wanted to talk about HIV/AIDS; it was like a devil and a ghost going around creating fear. People living with HIV/AIDS were discouraged and distressed, with no hope of getting better and no place to be in public, humiliated and stripped of their basic human rights. They were in big need of a compassionate and loving care, knowing that there is no cure or treatment available for them.

February 1992.

During the general yearly meeting of the St Camillus Foundation of Thailand in Bangkok in February 1992, the HIV/AIDS issue was discussed. Many members wanted the foundation to get involved in activities to help/support people infected and affected by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Some of the members got in touch with me and invited me to be available for this new task and to cooperate on future projects. What I noticed, at that time, is that many people in the assembly were scared to talk about this new subject. They willingly supported the idea because it was suggested by guidelines coming from abroad. The so called “new interventions and new illnesses” suggested by the Camillian General and Provincial Chapters.

The beginning of my involvement in HIV/AIDS field.

I spent a few months visiting and assisting HIV/AIDS patients at the national hospital for communicable diseases. I began to understand the new situation, the escalation of infections, and the increasing number of patients. I had a good relationship with the hospital staff and real good friends at the social department where the staff used to deal with difficult patients in need of counseling and accommodations.

I met Wibunchai, a patient in his thirties. He was smart, we could get along together and he understood his situation at the physical, social and

psychological level. Because of our friendship and his new spiritual strength his health improved and he recovered from several opportunistic infections. He also developed the knowledge and skill to be a leader.

With him, I also grew a lot in knowledge and experience and together we started to think in terms of doing something useful for the increasing number of new “AIDS victims”, so called at that time. We traveled to Europe and the USA to meet people and organizations working in the HIV/AIDS field.

Opening of Relief Center

After having prepared several proposals and held several meetings with the Catholic Bishop’s Conference and the St. Camillus Foundation...we knew that our task was quite tough and not easy...no one wanted to be involved nor allow us to use any land or building in suitable locations to start any activities connected with the real needs created by the spread of HIV infections. Fear, prejudices and ignorance were driving the minds of so many leaders that were unable to decide in favor of our proposals. The idea of many was to get some land in some remote areas and confine the AIDS people as was done with lepers.

I decided to look for a place to rent. In the beginning of 1992, we found a three storey building three store houses wide that was a few hundred meters from three big hospitals. It was located in Soi Rewadi 24, near Kelai junction, Nonthanburi province, a half an hour drive from the heart of Bangkok. We rented the building with a written contract for three years. We decorated and furnished it, then in November 1993, the new activity was officially opened. The new place could accommodate 17 people, with facilities for cooking, meetings and several offices. It was named “Relief Center”. The “Relief Center” was located in an urban area with the idea of participation, sharing and becoming a model in “living with HIV/AIDS” in the community.

Activities at the Center:

The center became active in providing prevention education. There were activities organized in the work places and in the local community in collaboration with the District Health Care Centers. The Center also provided shelter for people living with HIV coming from the countryside to meet the doctor at the overcrowded Bamraatnaradun Hospital (national hospital for communicable disease). The PLWHA were either unable to get a bed or were discharged from the hospital while still unable to travel because they were still weak.

Management of the Center:

Right from the beginning, I decided to keep a low profile and try not to be exposed too much knowing how a foreigner in such task could be vulnerable. In fact, in Thailand, people think that we foreigners do not have a real understanding of Thai culture when we come to talk about human rights, human dignity and social structure.

Since the beginning, Mr. Wibuciai (a PLWHA) was appointed as director. Mrs. Phontip, a physiologist, was appointed as coordinator of education and prevention activities. I was the coordinator of the whole project in the name of the St. Camillus Foundation. Several PLWHA were selected to be part of the staff, for cooking, cleaning and involved in educational activities. All the staff was trained in counseling.

On 14 November 1993, the Relief Center was opened after six months of preparation. All our neighbors knew what we were going to do, and the nearby hospital and the AIDS department/division were ready to fully support the endeavor. The Ministry of Health was just one km away from Soi Rewadi 24, where the Center was located. We always had a good relationship and good support from the Communicable Diseases Control (CDC) department, and the AIDS division . Prior to the opening, an invitation letter was sent to the entire neighborhood and to more than 50 Government and Non Governmental offices concerned with the new growing HIV/AIDS issues. More than 200 people joined us for the official opening, glad to see this new activity.

Six months of operation later, we were happy to see how our service had grown. We had provided accommodation and counseling to several hundred people living with HIV/AIDS. Our team was also providing education in several work places and communities.

Our neighbors shared their experiences with us and brought food for our people. They gave us furniture and helped our people to get in touch with the several services provided in the community. They loved us and treated the PLWHA with compassion and affection. At the nearby hospital we received permission to use two comfortable offices to establish the first association for people living with HIV/AIDS, called Candle of Light. Wibunciai, the director of the center, was elected president of this first group of about 25 people.

One day, we were called by CDC officers (AIDS division) to tell us that a complaint had been sent to them asking for the closure and relocation of the Relief Center. The complaint letter, signed by a lawyer and written in

the name of the community of Soi Rewadi 24 (the soi where the center was located), argued that an AIDS Center had opened without permission from the local authorities. The basis for the complaint was that the “AIDS and TB viruses” were spreading without any control to the children and people sharing the same road and the same public facilities, such as taxis, restaurants, and shops in the area. It would seem that a group of influential people pretended to ask for the closure of the center using their position and connections!

Genesis of the conflict!!!

The health authorities assured the worried people that there was no reason to be afraid and that the Relief Center did not need any special permission because it was neither a clinic nor a place that provided medical treatment. The health officers stated that there was no scientific evidence nor any medical data to support the idea that “AIDS” could be transmitted without having risk behavior related to injecting drugs or sex, The CDC officers knew exactly what we were doing and were ready to support us since the beginning of the establishment of the “Relief Center”. The officers provided an informal HIV/AIDS educational training at the Ministry of Health for some leaders of the Soi that represented the party involved...but with no success.

The conflict escalates

The CDC director became the new mediator. The director was confident that he could release the tension...and hopefully get understanding and acceptance...not knowing that behind the conflict there were some very influential people (a retired general living in the same soi and his friend) with a very bad attitude and having no knowledge of HIV/AIDS. People in the soi and some close neighbors were involved and believed in the prejudicial falsehoods and they became very worried, even about the rain falling from our roof.

All this new false understanding and defense actions were well supported by the district municipality officers and high rang civil servants from the Nonthanburi provincial office, obviously linked with the influent people. Some of our neighbors became and instrument in the hand of somebody who wants to create trouble and generate tension.

Meetings at local and provincial levels

Between May and September 1994, we had at least 8 meetings with the neighbors: at the town hall, at the provincial hall, at the ministry of health

and finally at the Center. The CDC director was confident that he could change the people's mentality and get them to grow in understanding. There were no signs of positive acceptance...the only request was "the center has to close or move". It seems that we had to deal with stubborn and ignorant people. From another perspective, many inspections by several provincial departments were going on, on a regular basis directed/ordered by influential people. They had hoped to take care of us and force us to move in a legal way; fortunately we did not break any law or commit any crimes, so no action was ever taken. The Center became very famous and our work was very highly appreciated by the many visitors. We received many signs of support and solidarity.

After the first meetings, the role of the CDC director as a mediator failed and the vice-provincial governor became the mediator/leader of the meetings.

The influential people behind the scenes never came out to talk nor were the real reasons told publicly and openly. In fact so many were worried about the new impact of the "AIDS center" so called by many, in the Soi Rewadi area. Influential people did not like to be known as living in the same Soi and local businesses, restaurants and merchants were worried about the negative image.

The owner of the three store shop house was treated as stupid and invited to break the rent contract. In the mean time some good benefactors fulfilled their promises and to avoid obstacles from that side, the decision was taken to buy the three store shop house for 4 million baht. So we became the real owners with full powers to use our property and to live on it.

Analysis of the role of mediators

Looking back, I can say that we could not find real mediators, the Director of the CDC department had a good understanding but no skills in communications. He was always in direct confrontation with the opposite side, and the opposite side was always accentuating the negative and not willing to find positive solutions.

The vice-provincial governor was in a too high position and was looking for short term solutions. He promised to find new locations, and he tried but failed three times to fulfill his promises. He did everything he could to make us decide to close the center as soon as possible. He was also under pressure from influential people he knew but never mentioned. He tried to solve the problem in a typical Thai way...not facing the truth and it not being much involved, creating sub committees and ordering local officers to act and report in a continuous basis. All our requests to involve

civil groups were rejected; he was afraid of rumors and afraid of losing face.

We, the representatives of the Relief Center and some members of the Soi committee, were called by the secretary of the Ministry of Interior (Dr. Pramuang) for a clarification. He acted as a mediator and promised a piece of land if we could decide to close the center and move soon. This was just a ploy to cheat us. We could not accept any “orders” without clear and practical plans. We always insisted in having a place to operate, to carry on educational activities and to shelter people living with HIV/AIDS in need of counseling and spiritual relief.

Actors

Relief Center staff, clients at the center, committee of the Soi (neighborhood), CDC/AIDS division officers, Mayor of Nonthanburi municipality, governor of Nonthanburi province, police of Nonthanburi municipality, influential people/neighbors.

From verbal conflict to escalation of violence

On September 10, 1994, a big protest was organized by the Soi committee in front of the Center. Big signs and long written statements were shown in front of the Relief Center and a hundred and so people shouted for half an hour: “Move the center out from our community”.

Our residents and staff were disheartened by these signs of rejection and stigma, but we decided to stand for the benefit of the whole community.

Local newspaper reporters were called and were paid to cover the news and to say that they were not in favor of having the Relief Center in such a community. We later discovered that the people holding signs were paid 500 baht each and from the several photos I took we can see several local civil servants behind them acting as organizers.

Several meetings were held following the protest where we were called by the local authorities to discuss the matter but there was nobody from the other side.

I had very good support from real friends, and at the same time was blamed as silly and hard-minded by members of the St. Camillus Foundation. The PLWHA staff and I decided to go on and to not give up. It seemed that the local community got used to our presence even if it wasn't much appreciated, because of the protest. All factions understood that there were no legal or any medical reasons to force us to move. It became a humanitarian issue. All were called to practice mercy, love and solidarity, in the name of each one's beliefs and sensibilities.

First violent attack

At 2.00 a.m. on the 21st of May 1995, a big noise frightened the whole community living on Soi Rewadi 24. A bomb exploded next to our van and my car. A lot of fragments landed in the Center and into neighboring houses. Nobody was injured because no one slept on the ground floors. Hundreds of policemen and investigators came the following day. The bomb was recognized as a military bomb that may have come from the local military camp.

The local press urged investigators to find the culprits and arrest them. Journalists and photographers came for interviews for more than one week. Hundreds of phone calls for explanations or to assure solidarity were received in those days. Two big press conferences were organized by a major NGO at the Relief Center and at the Provincial Hall, involving 48 AIDS-related organizations. One of the statements said: “If the Nonthanburi incident resulted in the center’s relocation it would be a great cause for alarm. Unfortunately that would mean that our society has justified an illegal and inhumane action”

“Wiboonchai accused the governor and some high-ranking police officers of adopting a bad attitude towards the center and people living with HIV/AIDS, enabling them to ignore the crux of the problem. Their response was that the Center had caused problems in the community and therefore it should be moved out. Nonthaburi’s superintendent, Police Col Somchjai Charoensap, even threatened me in a meeting that “I would not die from AIDS but at the hands of an M-16 rifle” (The Nation 17 June 1995).

The new issue: VIOLENCE

Our approach, staff and clients, was always a non-violent one. The Relief Center was founded on the pillars of merciful love, where all people living with HIV/AIDS were accepted and cared for because they are persons with dignity and an inestimable value. Interfaith programs were also developed and linked with local temples. Many Buddhist monks used to come and visit us. Violence became a new and big issue after the bomb incident. We and anyone that dared to support us were threatened by outsiders and anonymous assailants. Myself, I suffered several insults, threats and anonymous telephone calls. Our neighbors’ attitudes changed because they were afraid of the escalation of violence. So, they kindly asked us to consider moving as a real solution.

Problem of security

At the Center, we tried to organize ourselves to avoid further attacks by installing some spotlights for the night time and by varying the new time table. We requested police protection and investigations into the violence but nothing happened. The health care officers assured us of their constant support, we were glad of that, but they quite often reminded us that they did not have any weapons to defend us. Sometimes the reaction of some clients was not the most suitable ones, we, as staff had to be careful to educate to a non violent behavior inviting people to be calm, and practice forgiveness to get to the heart of the people.

At this point, it was very important for us to show the real face of HIV/AIDS, the face of a virus that has nothing to do with evil and unclean spirits. People living with HIV are normal people, human and sinners as we are in the same society. The first group of people living with HIV/AIDS suffered from stigma and discrimination because they were equated with injecting drug addicts, gays and prostitutes. The biases of the stereotypes and the prejudices towards the PLWHA scared the entertainment business sector. The price of land and houses in the area fell as the news about the Center spread. We were supported by many friends and NGOs who wanted us to continue our work as we tried to survive and decided to stay.

Second Violent Attack

On the evening of 25 August 1995, at 10 pm, we were still working and planning the next day's activities on the ground floor of the Relief Center when suddenly four shots were heard and we could listen to the noise of the bullets. A man dressed in dark clothing fired a few bullets in the darkness through our windows. Thank God, the bullets miss all of us. but the incident frightened us and from that day on, we seriously started to think of moving. The consequences were more press conferences, followed by more meetings and more people blaming us for creating an environment of fear in the area of Soi 24.

We were all tired and in a big meeting held at the provincial hall in October 1995, we decided to go on with the activities on prevention and visiting patients at the hospital. We no longer continued to accommodate and shelter people living with HIV/AIDS that had problems. The Governor and some people in the Soi were happy with this decision, but we found out later that many others could not accept even this because most of our staff was people living with HIV. By the end of the year, we had few more meetings and decided to move in May 1996.

In the meantime, I had several talks with people within our foundation and I was offered the use of a piece of land in the Rayong area. This was a suitable place, not in a deserted area as many suggested to go, to continue our work and develop activities for the poor, abandoned and rejected people living with HIV/AIDS. In 1995 we were the first NGO to establish a Center in the whole south-east region of Thailand. The region is a highly industrialized area, with a very high number of mobile people and fishermen. In a couple of years, Rayong became the province with the third highest rate of HIV.

Lessons Learned

The Relief Center provided service for 2 years and 6 months. The Center's Staff members and clients suffered because of the discrimination and violence. We invested a lot in terms of physical and spiritual energy. On the financial side, we invested more than 7 million baht that included the transaction to buy the three- floor- store shop house.

The incidents produced a lot in terms of a new understanding and a positive attitude for the whole of Thailand especially the people of the central region. For several months, Thai and English newspapers dedicated hundreds of articles with a positive understanding of the new issue of HIV/AIDS, the ways of transmission and the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS. The press conferences held after the violent attacks were very meaningful for the whole NGO community that was working directly and indirectly on HIV/AIDS issues. A coalition of NGO was formed and a new networking association was established in Thailand.

The first outspoken person living with HIV, Mr. Wibunciai, director of the Center, became a member of the commission to reform the existing National Aids Prevention and Control Plan. The first association of people living with HIV/AIDS (Candles for Life) was established within the National Hospital for Communicable Diseases. Its aim was to improve the service and relationship between hospital staff and patients at all levels.

The Relief Center on Soi Rewadi 24 was closed in May 1996

Camillian Social Center Rayong

The new Camillian Social Center – Rayong was officially opened on the **29th of January 1997** by Dr. Damrong, General Director of Communicable Disease Control. The new center was dedicated to the development of an integrated program of activities that would operate

outside of the health care sector. The Center was built to provide shelter and care to homeless, indigent, and rejected people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Special emphasis was placed on women and children, as they were the most vulnerable members of the society.

- Establishment of a sensitization and educational program to prevent HIV and building skills in protection focused on women and children.
- Opening of a shelter to accommodate rejected and homeless patients from the south-east region hospitals.
- Development of a Palliative Care Unit with 50 beds.
- First HIV association in the eastern region area established in 1997. This was followed by the formation of a HIV/AIDS network. More than 7.000 PLWHA now belong to the 54 associations in the south-east region.
- The “Garden of Eden” was opened in 2000 (self income generating activity) to accommodate homeless and rejected PLWHA.
- In 1999, a Child Care Center for orphaned children living with HIV/AIDS was opened, now there are 55 children
- A home for orphaned teenagers living with HIV/AIDS was opened in august 2006 and accommodates 22 students.

Participation and Involvement of the civil society.

Thanks to the networking associations and their advocacy work could the following was achieved:

- The production of eight ARV in Thailand; more are coming
- Access to care and ARV treatment for children and adults in the health care program and social security program
- Rights for people living with HIV/AIDS to work and to participate in social activities at all levels
- Monitoring of any vaccine and drug trials in the country
- Prevention of HIV from mother to child (now not more than 2%)
- Reduction of new infections from more than one hundred thousand per year (1996) to not more than 20.000 per year (2006).
- Access to public schools by children living with HIV

More effort and investment are needed to train and create resource persons and empower the civil society for a better and more extensive involvement and participation on the HIV/AIDS field in Thailand.