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March 2017

GDHF March 2017 Trip

Success against all odds

Having lived in the Bay Area and near the heart of Silicon Valley my entire life, the experience of traveling to Vietnam was a huge contrast to the everyday comforts of a modern home, amenities, and privileges that I often take for granted. The thought of going to a foreign country where I didn't speak or understand the language was a bit scary. However, the idea of being able to take part in making a positive impact within the Vietnamese communities was empowering.

For this trip, the Giao Diem Humanitarian Foundation tried out an approach called positive deviance. Based on the idea that within every community, there are individuals whose behaviors lead them to be successful at solving a particular problem better than their peers. Applying this approach to GDHF's Pediatric Nutrition & Supplement Program, the team held discussion sessions with the most impoverished parents at each school site and identified the parents of malnourished vs. non-malnourished children. They were able to ask them questions about their nutrition and hygiene practices to learn what strategies allowed parents of the nourished children to succeed despite having access to the same resources as their malnourished peers. After the discussions, the GDHF team discovered that parents in the PD families fed their children more often than was common among other families. Also, many of the PD families resisted the urge to buy sweets for their children before meals, thus saving that money for more nutritious foods. This practice prevented their children from becoming full and unable to eat the meals provided by Giao Diem at school. The patterns are clear, but these issues can't be solved overnight since they are behaviors deeply embedded in the culture.

I was also surprised by how the communities treated hygiene as a non-priority in many of these regions. While eating at restaurants, it is common practice for locals to toss their trash on the restaurant floor and there were dogs and cats wandering freely to pick up the scraps inside the restaurant. On one occasion, the team even saw a restaurant owner pick up a dead rat with

their bare hands, throw it away, and proceed to touch other items in the restaurant such as the fan. We can only hope that they washed their hands before touching any of the cooking utensils again. In certain school sites, families expressed difficulties having access to basic necessities, such as clean water. In some instances, the families needed to use the water from a nearby river, where as others needed to walk hours to a nearby village to get clean water. While GDHF has gained large success in reducing childhood malnutrition rates within the most impoverished provinces within Vietnam, there is still the challenge ahead of monitoring whether there is sustained rehabilitation within the communities served, and promoting long term social change within these communities.

Right now, GDHF works closely with the administrators, teachers and cook aides at the schools to provide rich soy milk and nutritious meals at the schools. The PNSP program also holds workshops for the teachers to educate them on hygiene and nutrition. The teacher then holds sessions to transfer the knowledge to the parents. So why is it so difficult to have the communities adopt better hygiene and nutrition practices? From our visit, it's clear that these practices are not the norm within the communities. Although the teachers educate the parents on nutrition and hygiene, it is impossible for us to know if they are applying the knowledge within their daily lives. In order to bridge the gap between knowing and doing, communities must feel like they've discovered the knowledge on their own and also feel like others in the community are also performing these activities. Finally, we must have leaders within the parent community who encourage other parents to practice these behaviors to help drive social change.

This experience has allowed me to witness extreme poverty for the first time. It also allowed me to see the positive impact GDHF has made in these impoverished communities with its nutrition project. Through the support of the AmeriCares Foundation & Abbot Fund as well as individual donors, GDHF is able to provide new facilities & financial support for more cook aides to prepare nutritious meals and soy milk for the school children. In addition to that, GDHF is also able to provide health education workshops for the teachers. Giao Diem has been very successful working in the school context to improve the nutrition of thousands of children in rural Vietnam. The next challenge will be to figure out how to collaborate more closely with the parent community to drive change in the behaviors that the team have identified to be potential risk factors for children who have remained malnourished year after year of participating in the program.