A cross-cultural bond forged during the
summit of the Vietnam War between
local people and New Zealand medical
teams sent in to help provide medical and
surgical services in the midst of the violence has,
decades later, resulted in a recent visit to New
Zealand by two Vietnamese surgeons.

Earlier this year, Orthopaedic surgeons Dr
Viet Vu Van and Dr Nhan Phan Tran Dai spent
six weeks attending theatre and consultations
in cities and towns across the country including
Auckland, Nelson, and Dunedin.

The visit by the two Vietnamese surgeons
accompanied by an interpreter was supported and
funded by a Surgeons International Award
through the RACS Foundation for Surgery
The RACS Foundation for Surgery has agreed to
fund a planned visit later in 2011 for two
NZ orthopaedic surgeons to the Quy Nhon
Rehabilitation and Orthopaedic Centre.

The visit was co-ordinated through the New
Zealand Viet Nam Health Trust (NZVNHT),
an organisation established during the 1990s
to assist the re-building of health care in Binh
Dinh province, Central Vietnam.

Since 1990, the Trust which until recently had
been funded predominantly by NZAID,
has provided equipment, support and surgical
team visits to the regional town of Quy Nhon
and Bong Son, where the NZ medical teams
had been stationed during the war.

The team visits have covered a range of
specialties including paediatrics, medicine,
orthopaedics and trauma, obstetrics, cervical
cancer screening, urology, general surgery,
anesthesiology, nursing programs including
infection control, laboratory training and the
establishment of a Blood Bank service.

With the Quy Nhon Rehabilitation and
Orthopaedic Centre now in the process of
being rebuilt, the recent six-week exchange
program was designed to give the surgeons
experience not only to complex orthopaedic
procedures but also to the organisational
structure and professional inter-relationships
of modern western health facilities.

The trip came at the request of the Director
of the Rehabilitation Centre, Dr Cuong Pham
Canh, who visited NZ in 2007 and wanted the
same experience for members of his surgical
team.

From February to April, the two visiting
surgeons were hosted and supervised by Mr
John Dunbar in Dunedin, Mr Allan Panting in
 Nelson, and Mr David Morris in Auckland and
Middlemore Hospitals.

According to a report written by the
surgeons following the visit, the procedures of
most interest included joint replacement
surgery, anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction, arthroscopy, fracture and
trauma management, particularly involving
the use of intra-operative X-ray imaging,
and the role of physiotherapy in rehabilitation.

As one of the few hospitals outside Ho Chi
Minh City and Hanoi that provides a paediatric
orthopaedic service, other than for acute trauma,
the surgeons from Quy Nhon also spent time
at Auckland’s Starship Children’s Hospital
investigating Ponseti casting in the treatment of
dislocated hips, the management of developmental dysplasia of the hip, and femoral osteotomy
for children with cerebral palsy.

Mr Dunbar, an orthopaedic surgeon with
a paediatric subspecialty, who has visited
Quy Nhon regularly in recent years to teach
and supervise the surgeons at the hospital,
said the experience as being of great value.

He said that until now, surgeons at the
Centre had been limited in what they could
do by many factors including the lack of
adequately sterile operating theatres, the lack
of surgical equipment and intra-operative
radiology and by the limitations placed upon
them and allied health professionals in their
ability to gain global exposure.

“The standard of surgery in Vietnam is pretty
good and the surgeons are very capable and
resourceful, but they are limited by equipment
and knowledge and in many cases have been
trained by surgeons who have also had limited
exposure to the developments taking place
around the world,” Mr Dunbar said.

“The rebuilding of the hospital gives them
a great opportunity to overcome some of
these problems particularly after seeing how
our hospital systems work in terms of patient
flow, in-patient and out-patient care, the use
diagnostic tools and post-operative care.

“That was one of the reasons that we chose
to host them in Dunedin and Nelson because
the hospitals here are similar in scale.

“That to me was the most significant aspect of
this visit, not just transferring skills
and knowledge, but giving the surgeons the
opportunity to see what’s possible, to give them
a vision and a pathway to follow in advancing
the care of patients in Vietnam.”

Mr Dunbar will visit the hospital when it is
fully operational next year.

He praised the efforts of Mr David Morris
in setting up the Health Trust and described
it as unique, in that it had not grown through
government initiatives, but simply through
the empathy felt by doctors for the suffering
of the people of Vietnam in the now widely
discredited geo-political conflict.

“There are still some older people in Quy
Nhon who hold New Zealanders in high
regard for the assistance offered them during
the war, particularly because the New Zealand
teams treated all victims equally, including members of the Viet Cong,” he said.

“I think a number of people in the western
countries involved in that conflict feel a degree of
guilt about what happened to the people of
Vietnam and it is a privilege to be in a position
to help them now.”

Orthopaedic skills vital

Mr Allan Panting who, along with his wife
Sunny, hosted the surgeons for two weeks
in Nelson, in March, said that while the
standard of health care in Vietnam still lagged
behind that offered in western countries, the
strengthening economy and greater openness
to the outside world were now spurring rapid advances.

He said that while Vietnam was listed as the
second most dangerous place to drive
after China, the work of the new Quy Nhon
Rehabilitation and Orthopaedic Centre was
of great importance.

“One of the really positive aspects of
this visit was the opportunity for the surgeons to
see how our hospitals work while they are
in the process of designing their own new
hospital,” he said.

“Because they work in a regional centre they
have more autonomy than perhaps do those
surgeons in the major metropolitan centres in
Vietnam so they will be able to make changes
which could then spark further change in
terms of post-operative care, for example, and
patient flow.”

Acknowledging that the Nelson and
Vietnamese hospitals differ greatly in the
facilities provided and the style of practice,
we considered it important that our visitors
had the opportunity for wide exposure to the
environment as well as orthopaedic surgery.

Arrangements were made for the visitors
to spend an unrestrained amount of time in
the theatre sterilisation unit, recovery, intensive
care and the emergency department where
staff made them welcome and spent time
discussing how each of these units functioned
most effectively to support patient care.

In the report written upon completion of
the visit, Dr Viet and Dr Nhan described the
experience as being of great value.

“We hope to translate most of what we have
learned in New Zealand into our practice in
the clinical setting of the new hospital for the
benefits of the people in central Vietnam,” they wrote.

When the new hospital goes into good
operation and new equipment is available,
we wish to gradually start surgeries such as
head of femur, femur osteotomy, ACL reconstructions
using hamstring tendon graft, external fixation
and hip and knee replacements.

“This was a very valuable time because
we were fortunate to observe, experience and
learn from experienced and passionate surgeons.
We appreciated so much their enthusiasm in
teaching us about standard, sophisticated
and advanced orthopaedic techniques and
procedures.

We also greatly appreciated the opportunity
to experience beautiful nature, interesting
culture and to meet with the
friendly people of New Zealand.”

With Karen Murphy

International Development

Helping old friends

An ongoing bond between New Zealand and Vietnam is assisting in building skills

Opposite page: Watching John Dunbar as he performs surgery; DIs Viet and Nhan looking pleased having survived a scenic flight with John Dunbar; DIs Viet and Nhan, assisted by John Dunbar in the operating theatre at the old Rehabilitation Hospital.

Below: Qui Nhon. DIs Viet and Nhan looking at x-rays with Allan Panting.


“ The program has provided equipment, support and surgical team visits to the regional town of Quy Nhon and Bong Son, where the NZ medical teams had been stationed during the war.”

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