

Weary Dunlop Boonpong Exchange Fellowship

International scholarships continue to serve our neighbouring countries as well as building ties between communities



A scholarship funded by the College that commemorates the bond forged between Australia and Thailand in the horrendous construction of the Thai-Burma railway during World War Two has now sponsored the visits of more than 70 Thai surgeons to Australia to advance their training.

Known as the Weary Dunlop Boonpong Exchange Fellowship, the program brings young Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons in Thailand (RCST) to Australia to assist and observe under the supervision of a local mentor.

While the recipients are not registered for the provision of primary care mainly because of language requirements, they observe and assist elective operations during the day and emergency procedures at night and weekends. All have access to hospital libraries and participate in surgical meetings and audits and are encouraged to attend appropriate lectures relevant to their interests.

The exchange Fellowship is named after Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop, one of Australia's greatest wartime heroes and life-long humanitarian and Mr Boonpong Sirivejbhan, a local man who helped the prisoners of war forced to build the railway by the Japanese.

Designed to not only boost the skills of the surgeons chosen, but to help them drive improvements in the Thai health system upon their return, the Scholarship consists of a \$10,000 stipend with travel costs usually provided by the RCST.

Two recent recipients talk to *Surgical News* of the value of the Exchange program.

Dr Sitichok Wachirasrisirikul: Cardiothoracic Surgeon

Why did you wish to come to Australia to work and study? I wanted the opportunity for training in adult cardiac surgery outside my country in new knowledge, new and different

techniques and to understand how Australian surgeons work.

When did you arrive and where have you been working? I am training at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney for six months.

What new skills or knowledge have you gained? I have learnt a lot of techniques in CABG (conventional and off pump), aortic root surgery, thoracic surgery and some parts of TAVI. I also appreciate the chance to observe surgeons and to ask and discuss matters with Professors and Fellows.

How will this impact upon your work at home and the care of your patients? It will absolutely impact on my ideas and techniques when I go back to my workplace.

Have particular surgeons in Australia acted as mentors or provided support? Yes, I wish to thank Professor Paul G. Bannon who has been very helpful. There are many others, but I also think it is up to the scholar to take responsibility for what they wish to learn.

What has been the highlight of your stay so far? I could not understand very much in the first couple of weeks with the English language when I started to train, but it has improved by working with nurses, residents and Fellows.

How important do you think the Weary Dunlop Boonpong Scholarships are for the advancement of surgery in Thailand and the development of strong bonds between Australia and Thailand? I think it is very, very important for young Thai Surgeons to have such experiences and to come to Australia for further training and this programme is important because it is very difficult to find a scholarship like this because of the English language proficiency tests imposed on surgeons working outside medical universities.



Dr Jarun Sayasathid: Cardiothoracic Surgeon.

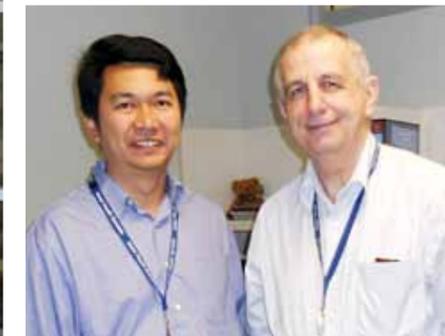
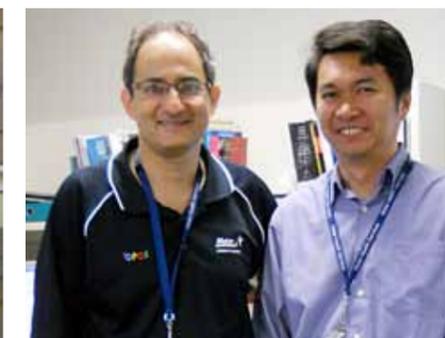
Why did you wish to come to Australia to work and study? I wished to come to Australia because it has many famous cardiac surgeons and advanced technology and medical care. I hope to learn and obtain good experiences to improve my knowledge and skills when I return to the hospital in my home country. Thailand does not have many cardiac surgeons, especially paediatric cardiac surgeons. I finished my cardiothoracic training in 2004 and after that I worked as a Cardiothoracic Surgeon at Naresuan University Hospital in Phitsanulok province. The hospital, located in the North of Thailand, served a population of around seven million people. Nevertheless, there is no one who can do paediatric cardiac surgery, but me. I have many children with heart disease and many of them must be referred for surgery to a hospital in Bangkok. I can do adult cardiac operations and only simple congenital cardiac operations for children. Hence, I wished to come to Australia to work and improve my skills in paediatric cardiac surgery.

When did you arrive and where have you been working? I had been an observer at Mater Children's Hospital in Brisbane for two months in October and November last year then I have been a Cardiothoracic Fellow at the Children's Hospital at Westmead since April.

What new skills or knowledge have you gained? I have gained a lot of knowledge and skills including operative techniques, how to approach and treat many complex congenital heart diseases, what it is like to work in such a health care system and also improving my English language.

How will this impact upon your work at home and the care of your patients? When I go back to my country later this year I will use this learning experience to improve myself, my team and the health care system. I hope I can better assist many children with congenital heart diseases in my country.

Have particular surgeons in Australia acted as mentors or provided support? Yes, I am greatly appreciative of Dr Graham Nunn at Mater Children's Hospital and Dr David Winlaw at Westmead Children's Hospital. Also I wish to thank everyone at both hospitals for their warm



Far left: Dr Sitichok Wachirasrisirikul with colleagues at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Left: Dr Jarun Sayasathid out the front of Westmead hospital; above, with Dr Sylvio Provenzano and Dr Graham Nunn.

welcome, advice and the good care taken of me throughout the time I have been working here.

What has been the highlight of your stay so far? They would be the very nice experiences I have had with both the people and the complete facilities in the excellent hospitals I've worked at and the health system. I also have enjoyed the experience of living in this modern and beautiful country.

How important do you think the Weary Dunlop Boonpong Scholarships are for the advancement of surgery in Thailand and the development of strong bonds between Australia and Thailand? It's very difficult for many young surgeons in Thailand to apply to be a Fellow and get good experiences in a developed country like Australia. One of the major problems for us is the language, because we cannot pass the examination. Hence, the Weary Dunlop Boonpong Exchange Scholarships are very important to us as you give Thai surgeons the opportunity to live and be Fellows in Australia. We will take these wonderful experiences and knowledge to develop our careers and health care systems in Thailand. I think the programme definitely helps develop a strong bond between our countries.

With Karen Murphy