Quarterly Update

Sabaidee (Hello and greetings!) from Vientiane, Lao PDR! It has been an eventful 3 weeks since arriving in the “land of a million elephants” and the bar has been set high. Within days of arriving to my new home, a 2-day Curriculum Development Workshop facilitated by Dr. Diane Stadler, Dr. Justin Denny and myself at the National Institute of Public Health was a success. We initiated conversation and questions among the group consisting of attendees from the Ministry of Health, National Institute of Public Health, National Nutrition Institute, Mahidol University in Thailand, University Health Sciences in Vientiane, and Mahosot Hospital. The team from the Nutrition Institute at Mahidol University (INMU) provided excellent insight and suggestions from their years of experience training professionals and clinicians in nutrition in SE Asia. The Ministry of Health representatives, Dr. Chandavone Phoxay and Dr. Sengchanh Kounnavong, encouraged discussion and assisted with translation. By the end of the two days, we had defined the two certificate tracks (Clinical Nutrition & Dietetics and Nutrition Program Management), aligned curriculum components with the National Nutrition Strategy for 2025 in Lao, solidified our next steps moving forward, and found agreement on courses to be offered in the core curriculum of both tracks.

In the days following the workshop, I met with Drs. Chandavone and Sengchanh several times to continue to refine our goals and clarify the next steps in moving the curriculum forward through both the Ministry of Health and Education as well as the University of Health Sciences to ensure credit earned at LANI is transferrable towards a diploma and/or masters degree.

I continue to work closely with the Ministry of Health team and Dr. Diane Stadler, to build a Clinical Dietetics curriculum that aligns with the goals of the country and the resources available. Our goal is to have a finalized curriculum by the first of November, nominate and select students by the first of December and officially begin classes for the first cohort of Clinical Nutrition & Dietetics students on February 6, 2016.
Through the incredibly hard work of Dr. Denny, Dr. Cronn and Dr. Stadler along with the U.S. Department of Defense, on Monday, September 5, we signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for both the building of the LANI and the provision of technical and teaching support. This historic event marks the LANI as the first educational institution for nutrition in Lao and the beginning of educating the first dietitians in this country that struggles with some of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world.

This was a historic week for the country of Lao PDR as well, with President Obama arriving for the 28th and 29th ASEAN and Related Summits marking the first visit by a U.S. President to the country.

Dr. Sara Schwanke Khilji and I were honored and humbled by the invitation to attend the State Dinner at the Presidential Palace with President Obama on Tuesday, September 6. It was an occasion filled with mirth, dancing and gratitude.

President Obama opened the meal with a brief statement:

“I understand there’s a saying in Laos that “sweet makes you dizzy and bitter makes you healthy,” and I’m looking forward to being both healthy, and maybe a little dizzy as well, by the end of this meal. As the first U.S. President to visit this nation, I know my visit comes at a very important time. I won’t make long remarks here; I’ll be speaking later this afternoon. But for now, let me simply say how much I hope that our new partnership will mean greater progress and opportunity for the people of Laos. I understand that there’s a ceremony that’s often performed here that’s based on the idea that the body has 32 souls, and in bad times some souls go missing. Blessings are given when they return and when the body is whole again.

So I propose a toast to the dignity and the future of the people of Laos. And to Mr. President and the government, as well as the people -- may this visit and our work together be another step towards making the relationship between our two countries whole again.”
The food was impeccably presented and the flavors would have Anthony Bourdain raving. During the meal we were entertained with traditional Lao dancing, singing, and a rendition of Etta James, “At Last”, that nearly brought a tear to many eyes. Just before dessert was served, President Obama was invited to dance in traditional Lao fashion.

And as the song ended, he left in a brisk fashion all the while smiling and giving thanks to the wonderful Lao hosts.

From the luncheon he went directly to the Lao Cultural Hall to give his speech to the Lao people. A small excerpt from this speech mentions the investment and collaboration surrounding nutrition in Lao.

“ We want to be your partners as you invest in the well-being of your people, and especially your children. I believe that when any child anywhere goes hungry, when their growth is stunted, that’s a profound injustice. So we’re joining with Laos to promote nutrition and bring more healthy meals to children in school so they can grow strong, focus in class, and realize their full potential.”

As we move forward in achieving the goals and realizing the vision of so many I look forward to continuing to provide updates and news, although I am not sure how to top these few weeks!

Warmest regards (literally) from SE Asia,
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The U.S. government, Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), and the Lao Ministry of Health signed two Memorandums of Understanding on September 5th to construct and operate a new Lao-American Nutrition Institute (LANI) in Vientiane. The Institute will help prevent malnutrition and promote health and well-being throughout Laos. The Oregon Health and Science University will train dietitians at the Institute and help Lao experts to respond to the core drivers behind malnutrition throughout the country, thus improving the health of Lao people for generations to come. When completed, LANI will have classrooms, a lecture hall, outpatient and inpatient clinical assessment and intervention areas, and a clinical laboratory. It will also include a teaching/demonstration kitchen and café in order to feature innovative food products and to display the research efforts that are being studied; outdoor training facilities to simulate typical rural home environments in order to evaluate innovative and adaptive food preparation techniques and storage methods; and a community-based demonstration garden to display and test “garden-to-family” sustainable agriculture methods, hygienic animal husbandry practices, and health-promoting environmental initiatives.

This landmark achievement represents the culmination of 3 years of planning and collaboration between the U.S. and Lao governments. As technical advisors and teachers, OHSU and other regional partners will offer over 85 years of experience training registered dietitians. Graduates of the LANI’s clinical dietetics and community nutrition management programs will work at national, provincial, and community hospitals and with community leaders throughout Lao PDR to address malnutrition, a top health priority in Laos. Although significant advancements have been made to reduce malnutrition in recent years, the overall rates of stunting and wasting remain at 35.6% and 9.6%, respectively, among children under the age of 5 years.