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HEADLINE: Living together

SUBHEADLINE: How to promote more home and community care for HIV/Aids patients is the theme of a major international conference in Chiang Mai this week. And there's no shortage of inspiring local examples of how much better things can be when people pull together

BYLINE: Story and pictures by

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Suwimon, nine, nicknamed Om, looks lovely in her brand new Barbie doll outfit of black and pink velvet, with matching pink slippers sitting on the floor by the girl's bedside. Nearby, colourful cartoon characters play silently on a small TV screen.

Unfortunately, the little girl is too weak to look at herself in the mirror, too sick to pay the least attention to either her appearance or the Power Puff girls on TV.

The illness gnawing away at Om is taking all her strength, sending her more

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KEYWORD: Joe Cummings,

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HEADLINE: Lonely traveller

SUBHEADLINE: Guidebook author Joe Cummings reveals what it's like to be him and insists the impact of his writing is overstated

BYLINE: Story by

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

BYLINE: Picture by

BYLINE: SOMKID CHAIJITVANIT

'Not all who wander are lost,' wrote JRR To be like this for the past few

weeks.

But however grim this period for Om, she has at least the little comforts of her grandma's home, where she can rest in her own little bed under her own bed covers, rather than in the cold, bare and meaningless setting of a hospital room.

``The only thing I do as a precaution is to wear gloves whenever I have to put a dressing on her wound or clean her,'' said Om's grandmother, who also took care of her daughter and son-in-law in their final days.

Just the idea of visiting the local hospital for treatment to help reduce her fever and nasty cough brings a grimace to the little girl's emaciated face. ``Mai ao'', ``Mai ao'' (I don't want it), she says, with a frail cry.

Whatever the outcome of the brave battle being conducted by Om and her dedicated grandma in Chiang Mai's Phrao district, they are already scoring a major moral victory, as models of behaviour and courage in the fight against the epidemic.

Learning how to live productively and well with the disease is the main theme at the Fifth International Conference on Home and Community Care for Persons Living with HIV/Aids, which is taking place in Chiang Mai this week (ending tomorrow) and is being attended by some 3,000 participants.

The conference is discussing how Aids patients _ and HIV-positive people who generally have around 10 years before the onset of the disease _ have the right to remain a part and parcel of their community rather than to be discarded in overcrowded hospitals, as it is often the case.

Increasingly, it is being pointed out, this right will also be a necessity.

``As more people already infected with HIV develop Aids, we will face a shortage of hospital rooms. It's vital that families and communities understand that patients can perfectly well remain at home. Most don't need hospitalisation,'' said Nuntawun Yuntadilok, chief of the Preventive Behaviour and Social Development Section, Aids Division at the Ministry of Public Health's Communicable Disease Control Department.

``This is the future,'' she continued persuasively.

It's time for old attitudes to change, said Dr Worawut Khovacharasakul, director of San Sai Community Hospital in Phrao district (where one of the first declared Aids patients in the country was treated, back in the late 1980s).

``On occasion, it's still as if a person has died before they actually succumb to the disease. We've had families come and request that we somehow get rid of the patient ... Thankfully, this is not the norm.

``There are countless examples in our region to show that HIV/Aids patients can successfully remain at home, where they benefit from greater moral support and live more cheerfully.

``This kind of psychological support to the patient is, above all, society's responsibility. If the whole community could understand this simple point, and contribute to implementing it, without fear, the work of medical staff would be greatly facilitated,'' Dr Worawut said.

``People have to understand the specificity of the disease [ie, it is extremely difficult to contract the HIV virus other than through sexual relations] and act accordingly. If not, with the rising numbers with HIV developing the actual disease in the future, we won't be able to cope.

``Another point to remember is that other communicable diseases may crop up in future and we need to be able to handle them,'' he said.

It's important that HIV/Aids patients themselves contribute to a better future, said Sumalee Chairaksawat, a nurse at San Sai Hospital.

``At one time, we'd be seeing families breaking up when someone was diagnosed HIV positive. People would sell all their belongings _ it was like they thought they would die straightaway once they'd been diagnosed with HIV.

``But actually patients have to be able to face themselves and to not act as victims. They must look for their real friends and think of their future, their work life, their children. They must work to stay as healthy as possible. There are plenty of small things they can do to help themselves financially and in other ways.''

This is the first year that the annual conference on home and community care for persons living with HIV/Aids is being held in a developing country.

As the host, Thailand is presenting visitors with a complex picture. On the one hand, things are far from reassuring here, with roughly one million people infected with HIV/Aids. Almost 200,000 of those have full-blown Aids (see table).

On the other hand, this country can point to significant successes in the battles both to beat and to live with the disease.

''The traditional values of hospitality and care in Thailand; political commitment at the highest levels of government and tireless efforts by non-governmental organisations, community-based groups, religious communities and associations of people living with HIV are all part of success stories in Thailand and many parts of the world,'' said Phan Wannamethee, secretary-general of the Thai Red Cross Society during his welcome address on Monday.

''Let the 'Power of Humanity', the power of goodwill and understanding, assist us to bring home and community care for people living with HIV/Aids to the maximum possible level of skill and success,'' he concluded.

The ''Power of Humanity'' theme of the event has been defined by organisers as ''the strength and capacity of the human spirit to care for others''.

Conference delegates are being invited to visit a range of projects in the Chiang Mai area that are testament to this human spirit.

There is no shortage of options. Chiang Mai was the first city in Thailand to be confronted with the pandemic _ the first case was reported in 1984.

Since then, the area has responded with an inspiring wealth of initiatives by government agencies, NGOs, community-based organisations and peer support groups working on home and community care for people living with the disease.

Among the groups that conference participants will have the chance to visit are the Mother and Child Concern Foundation in San Pa Tong district, which

supports elderly patients; the Clear Skies Project in Doi Saket district, which provides holistic and alternative health care; the Viengping Children's Home & Community Care Project in San Kamphaeng district which assists orphaned children; Hua Rin Temple in San Pa Tong district which provides care and support, and many more.

The visits, say organisers will enable international and national delegates to learn first-hand about the range of current responses in Chiang Mai to HIV/Aids. The visits will also facilitate the sharing of ideas and experiences and provide opportunities for networking and mutual empowerment.

Orphanages, for example, are a topic for discussion, said Wiyada Phothi-ard of the Vieng-ping Children's Home, which is run by the Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and is the only government orphanage for some 17 provinces in the North.

``We have a wide variety of branches and activities, including a Reunification Project, a Foster Home project and the Help Children with Aids project ... but in general, we try as much as possible to have children remain in their community or in foster families. The orphanage is actually only a last resort, to be used whenever there is no other solution.''

The Viengping centre has had much success in terms of adoptions, as can be seen in the home's entrance hall, where cheerful boards display photos of healthy-looking children now living in Europe, America and Australia, as well as a few in Thailand.

Hua Rin Temple, which is energetically involved in HIV/Aids prevention, as well as care and support for children and people of all ages affected by the disease, also has many lessons to share with conference delegates.

Since 1993, the Buddhist temple has run a wide range of activities _ from teaching meditation and giving moral support to affected people, to creating handicraft goods to be sold for the benefit of people with HIV/Aids. Condom distribution and activities for children are also on the agenda.

Assistant abbot, Phra Khru Samooh explained: ``Some 30 people living with HIV/Aids live here. We're very close to them, and we're able to give them

moral support, teach them meditation and attend to their needs 24 hours a day.

``We also help them to produce candles, flowers, greeting cards and other crafts to make money, since the economic consequences of the diseases are often devastating for families.

``One of our main concerns is also to try and tackle the problem of children and teenagers, who tend to be neglected while living in extended families. These kids are often left to themselves and have too much idle time, which can mean they end up badly. So we try to offer them activities at the temple, such as learning to type or use a computer, and various other activities.''

For more examples of inspiring altruism in relation to HIV/Aids, visitors need only go to the Sangha Metta project at Mahamakut Buddhist University in Wat Chedi Luang Worawiharn.

The temple is involved in a wide range of activities involving monks and nuns from Thailand as well as neighbouring Burma, Laos and Cambodia. For example, it organises home visits to patients, a bank project, lectures, workshops and it cares for orphans and hilltribe people.

``We'd like more temples to become HIV/Aids friendly,' said project manager Lawrence Maund.

``We're trying to build bridges with this portion of the population ... even in places where the disease seems not yet to have struck. Aids is a societal problem. Everyone should join hands _ there may be no cure yet but society can still protect itself from the social and economic consequences of the disease.''

After nearly 15 years experience dealing with HIV/Aids, Chiang Mai has come a long way since the days when people would not attend funerals of Aids victims for fear of contracting the disease.

Chiang Mai surely has valuable lessons to share, not just with international conference participants but also with other regions in Thailand.

``There are still some provinces where very little is being done because of

a belief that there is little exposure to the disease. But it's certain that the virus is there, even if it's so far unreported,' said Dr Worawut.

He points out an early, major error: ``We didn't realise the scope of the problem, the seriousness of the disease, fast enough.''

Nuntawan agreed. The virus may be booming in regions such as Northeast and the South, she said.

In which case, it's clear that it's all the more vital that other regions learn lessons from Chiang Mai's hard-earned, often inspiring example.