



Mai Chau, is the remote mountainous district NW of Hanoi where Doctors of the World (DOW) did the intervention I was to assess. I spent 1 week in Hanoi working with the project coordinators to prepare a project plan and create several surveys for the assessment. Then I went with a team to spend two weeks in Mai Chau to administer the surveys to determine the effectiveness of the intervention at improving maternal and child health in ethnic minorities in 10 of the 22 communes of this district. The team consisted of five people; myself, my translator, the project lead and two professional medical interviewers to administer the surveys. In Mai Chau, the team expanded to include two local project coordinators who would arrange our visits to the communes, translate for us when the ethnic minorities could not speak Vietnamese, gather District level health outcomes data to augment our work, and sometimes, in the more remote areas, prepare food for us and arrange our sleeping accommodations.

Mai Chau is only 170 kilometers, less than 100 miles from Hanoi, but it took 5 hours to get there in an all terrain vehicle that definitely earned its value on the trip. The road winds through and over treacherous mountain cliffs and sometimes the road is nothing more than dirt and rock as there is ongoing construction to improve the road. There had been a great deal of rain before we left Hanoi, due to typhoons in southern China, causing all sorts of landslides and floods, which made the road even worse.

For the first week and a half of my stay in Mai Chau, it seemed to basically rain all the time, or if it was not actually raining, it had just finished raining or was about to start raining again. The interesting thing is that the Vietnamese seem to totally disregard the rain. I guess when it rains this much you would never get anything done if you waited for it to stop raining to do things.

Our project plan was to survey mothers, village health workers and commune health workers in 5 communes participating in the intervention. The surveys, along with some additional data from the District Hospital and from interim assessments done by DOW would give me the information I needed to determine how well the intervention had worked.

We surveyed the mothers to find out how well they retained knowledge taught to them through the DOW intervention and to try and understand whether they have changed their behavior as a result of what they have learned. Generally, I was quite impressed with the knowledge of the mothers. I made some of the knowledge questions pretty challenging and they still seem to have preformed well. We interviewed only currently pregnant women or mothers with children 12 months or less to make sure they received the intervention. We would interview the mothers at the Commune Health Station, or often, visit their homes to do the interviews. It was incredibly interesting to see their homes and play with the babies, although I must admit that more than a few babies immediately started howling as soon as they laid eyes on me. I guess I do look pretty different than most people in Vietnam.

In the beginning, the homes were pretty shocking to me. There was no running water, no bathroom, often a dirt floor and everything just looked dirty to me. After a while though, I began to notice that they had a different standard of cleanliness than what I am used to and in their own way, were very clean. For example, the babies were always clean (although they never wore diapers and I couldn't figure out how that worked) and I almost always saw fresh wash hanging out to dry. We were almost always offered tea, which I hesitated to drink until I saw that they do a neat disinfecting trick. They boil fresh hot water and pour it into each of the teacups, then swirl the hot water around to sterilize the cup. They then pour that water out the window and fill the cup with fresh tea. So, I felt comfortable drinking the tea, although I didn't often drink much as it tasted like bark to me.

The intervention also included various trainings for both the Village Health Workers (VHWs) and Commune Health Workers (CHWs) on both clinical skills and communication/organization skills and I developed a survey for each of these groups to determine how well they have retained the knowledge taught to them in the trainings and whether it has changed the way they do their jobs. We also ask them about their experiences with their supervisors and the local bureaucracy, which the intervention tried to improve as well.

The most important thing for the health workers to be able to do is to identify when a patient needs to be referred for more comprehensive care. VHWs for example need to be able to identify danger signs in pregnancy and refer the mother to the Commune Health Station and CHWs need to be able to identify danger signs in labor and delivery and refer these women to the District Hospital. On the surveys, the health workers had trouble identifying all of the danger signs for most of the trainings they have received, but they were usually able to appropriately refer patients when a case example was described to them. What may be a recommendation in the final report is the creation of "reminder cards" for the health workers to carry around with them and look at to remind them of danger signs in various clinical situations. Basically all of the health workers were very enthusiastic about the trainings and the impact it has had on their ability to do their jobs.

Some of the things I observed however were troubling. For example, the CHW at one commune who is in charge of maternal and child health could not correctly identify any danger signs in labor and delivery or in post partum, although she did confirm attending the trainings and rated them as 'good' as well as indicating that she thought her skills had improved. Then she told us that they just don't see labor and delivery or post partum problems. Of course not, because she clearly could not identify them as danger signs if she did see them.

Some days, bureaucratic nonsense that I could never seem to understand would force us to not move forward with our next commune and would leave my interviewers with nothing to do. It was inexplicably impossible to change the schedule and visit some other commune instead of the one planned, but I quickly gave up trying to figure out that kind of stuff or even trying to influence things as long as I got my data. The data gathering went quite well anyway. When we did actually get to communes, the interviewers were usually able to gather 2 days worth of data in just one day and the surveys I wrote seemed to be appropriate. A world away from my desk at Pfizer, I thought one beautiful morning (between downpours) as I walked in my flip-flops with

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my pants rolled up to my knees down a muddy road following a little tiny ethnic Thai lady (head of the Women's Union in this commune) in her traditional outfit to homes of mothers.

We spent most of our time working, but over a weekend we had a chance to visit a few local attractions. On Saturday night, I went to spend the night in a stilt house. The ethnic Thai build lovely wooden houses on stilts, about 7 feet in the air, with lots of windows and a creaky split bamboo floor. They are just one big room, which they use as both living and sleeping space. Below the house, they keep their water buffalo, pigs etc. and also have their "kitchen" which is generally a fire pit and a rickety shelf with some crazy looking containers with who knows what in them. The stilt house we stayed in had no animals underneath it except for the cutest little puppy, which is good because I have been in other stilt houses for interviews with the mothers and they can be quite pungent from the animals below. It cost 30,000 Dong each to stay there, which is \$2. They made us three little "rooms" by hanging curtains on strings to separate the space and also hung up on the strings 4-cornered mosquito net spaces for each of us. Under each mosquito net was a bamboo mat, 2 rolled up quilts made of hand-made ethnic fabrics, a small pad to sleep on and a little pillow. I slept wonderfully well, because it was nice and cool, off the ground and with all sort of breezes blowing through.

After we got settled in the stilt house, we went for a walk before dinner and I had a ridiculous little accident occur. We had to cross a stream, which would normally not be very strong, but because of the rain, it was overflowing. I tried to jump across, but in an embarrassing show of total gracelessness, couldn't make it and landed in the stream, losing one of my beloved bright yellow flip-flops in the process. Our driver (Chien Dong, whose name literally means Cease-fire...he was born during the Vietnam war and it was hopeful thinking on his parents' part) tried to grab it, but to no avail. I went barefoot the rest of the way and we had to go immediately to the shoe shack to get a new pair of water sandals.