

Clinic's zinc roof, canvas sheets

Mind your body, The Straits Times (Thursday, 27 August 2009)



Photo: Dr Joseph Thambiah

When the Yogyakarta earthquake occurred in 2006, it did more than shake the ground there.

Dr Joseph Thambiah (above, in Batam), who led a medical team to the disaster area in Java, Indonesia, was shaken by what he saw.

'It was my first real taste of a medical mission and I realised that there are communities out there that need help,' said Dr Thambiah, 49, the division head of orthopaedic trauma at National University Hospital.

That same year, with support from his church, StAndrews' Cathedral, he took the initiative to lead a team of fellow volunteers to the outskirts of nearby Batam, also in Indonesia, for monthly medical relief missions.

This Batam Medical Outreach programme has medical and non-medical volunteers. It visits three villages each time.

Under zinc roofs and on canvas sheets, the team treats more than 1,000 villagers who queue up for several hours. However, moving beyond basic health care, the team wants to raise the overall health standard of the community, he said.

'This initiative should not be just a hit-and-run event where there is no significant impact on the people's lives,' he added.

Hence, in May 2007, some months into the team's first visit, health education lessons began.

The villagers received medical advice from the doctors, nurses and other volunteers. It included tips on nutrition, as the doctors noticed high blood pressure levels in many villagers due to their high-salt, low-protein diet.

In recent months, the people's livelihood was put at risk by a drop in the fishing catch. Hearing of their plight, the team included food distribution in their monthly trips.

Some 200 needy families in one or two of the selected villages were given a month's supply of essentials like milk powder and cooking oil.

'Batam is only an hour away from us, yet they lead such different lives,' said Dr Thambiah, who has made 24 trips so far. His son, a 20-year-old second-year medical student, goes with him on the trips now.

Once, Dr Thambiah recalled, a villager had asked for an extra tube of prescribed cream for sores. In her hands was a used tube that had been flattened and pressed to squeeze out the very last bit. She was afraid that one tube would not last her through until the doctors visited again.

The team rotates among the different villages. With many villages to cover, each village gets this free medical service only once a year.

'Basic health care is so precious to them as visiting a doctor in Batam is either too far or, mostly, too expensive,' said Dr Thambiah.

'We are very blessed here in Singapore and we should do our part to give back to the society.'