

LET US LEARN FROM THAI PEOPLE!

(the **V.** International Conference
“**HOME** and **COMMUNITY CARE** for **PLWHA**”,
Chiang Mai, XII. 2001)

(translated from Latvian)

Thailand as a host country for this conference has not been chosen deliberately: community care for PLWHA really works here!
We should keep in mind that Thailand (previous Siam) is a 98% Buddhist country and one of its principles (Pha Pa) is to make merit by voluntary contributions towards a special cause, usually to meet some specific public needs. Including the care for PLWHA.
A cultural shock occurs to every Westerner visiting Thailand (one should visit this country some day!):
How the traditional values do not disappear (e.g., nobody feels shy to wear a national costume), proudly co-existing with all the modern entities.
How there are no beggars and people look happy while the wages are low (low are the prices, too!) – just a single person asked me for a cigarette in two weeks time.
How safe one feels anytime anywhere in the capital (Thailand is almost a mono-national country)!
How they manage without pornography, instead having lots of children – the median age of people on streets seems, maximum, 30 years.
How they adore their 78 years old king, who really cares for his people – every Thai is ready to die for him!
Some Western “values”, like sending aged parents to alms- houses seems an extreme savageness to any Thai.
All in all, Westerner feels like a freshman facing this much older culture.

HRH Princess Soamsawali - the eventual heiress to the throne - inaugurated **the conference**.

Even its **organisational** side differs from ones experienced in Europe:
Art students are sketching or serving conference delegates.
Conference bags are hand woven, with traditional Lan Na (North Thailand's) embroidered ornaments (not the pharmaceutical companies' plastic ones we are used to at other conferences) – PLWHA groups have been allowed to fund- raise this way.
Conference venue – the “Lotus” hotel - is a modern building with traditional architectural elements. Wonderful national instrumental music quietly sounds in its corridors.
There are some Oriental peculiarities, though – one has to get accustomed to them.
E.g., the same floor for one hotel wing is the sixth, for the other – minus second but for the shopping mall – the fourth.
The most emotional is the cultural night's closing after the AIDS march. It takes place by the Suan Dok temple and its royal sepulchre. Participants are

given a chance to light floats and watch them collide with stars in the Oriental sky with its lying sickle moon.

This lighting for Thai symbolizes the repentance of sins to come...

Daily conference newsletter has good news in it: Thai PLWHA have won their **political battle** – after the World AIDS Day March in Bangkok, Thai Government Pharmaceutical Organisation which produces generic versions of essential ARVs has announced monthly cost reduction of its ARV medications from 112\$ to 55\$ starting next year. Since the price of ARV drugs in Thailand is constantly falling, it may reach 22\$ per person per month in the next few years. Plans are that in the next 5 years all the PLWHA will get full treatment coverage. The Public Health Ministry is going to double its ARV budget in 2002. A committee sets out the criteria for deciding on who should be the first to get the drugs. The panel comprises the Ministry, medical experts and 10 persons from PLWHA network.

Another news is that the **VI HCC conference** will be held in Senegal, 2003.

A special symposium deals with the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria (**GFATM**). NGO's will not have a direct line to the funding. They have to incorporate through national collaborative mechanisms. Actually, NGO's may also apply directly to the Fund. In such cases they need to demonstrate why they could not be included in the country process, and then the Board will review on it.

The workshop "Alternative Therapies and Traditional Medicine to Normalize HIV Infection" gives interesting insights. **Blood type diets:** e.g. if you have blood type O, you may experience problems with grain products (since meat was the first food the human race used).

Coconut oil or pulp (1/2 – 1 cup per day) diminishes HIV viral load and improves immune status.

The exhibition hall is vibrant – one may experience different types of Thai **massage** (the most interesting is tapping the body with wooden peg and hammer), discover the power of **Pyramid** (the ancient science from Atlantis civilisation), try some specific herbal teas from boiling pots or a jelly- like mixture of different tasty natural remedies.

Thai cuisine is very healthy (just quite spicy), and rich in vitamins – in two weeks time I did not encounter a single fat person. Any food- store has got a range of healthy products – e.g. aloe or grass jelly drinks, chrisantemium drink or tree- fungus drink with honey etc.

Some 20 **empowering visits** were organised both prior and after the conference to PLWHA communities in North Thailand. Income from these visits was distributed among respective communities.

During one of the visits to the Golden Triangle region we experienced how PLWHA from the "Loving Care Movement" group are being given chance to generate extra income (from growing medical herbs to filling them in capsules, breeding ducks, traditional weaving etc.).

At another village volunteers (villagers' and PLWHAs' health educators) are getting free access to doctors for themselves and their family members. There is another Buddhist principle called Bun Kongkhao - a public merit making: after the annual harvest, villagers bring certain amount of paddies to the temple. Its proceeds will be spent to meet a certain specific public need announced beforehand.

No comment – let's learn from Thai people!

Having fallen in love with Thailand, its people (and the conference) I end up with one more Buddhist expression:
"Nothing is so strong than gentleness and nothing so gentle as real strength."

A.Kalnins,
AGIHAS