

Reminiscences

Professor Sir David Weatherall FRS

The idea of the Bangkok unit was born in a New York hotel in 1978. In December 1977, the Board of Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation agreed, at the suggestion of Kenneth Warren, to establish the Great Neglected Diseases of Mankind program to “create a network of high-quality investigators in this field”. The idea was to bring together several research groups working on the more basic aspects of diseases of the developing countries. Much to my surprise, Rockefeller invited my group to join the program. When I was told that this would offer research support for a minimum of eight years and that the only stipulation was that we met annually with the other groups to exchange information, I decided to go ahead.

At the first annual meeting of the program, which was held in New York in 1978, the then Director of the Wellcome Trust, Peter Williams, was invited. On the first evening, Peter told me that he had a particularly good bottle of scotch in his room and would I like to come and sample it. Helped by the scotch, we discussed how it would be best to alter the concept of tropical medicine to medicine in the tropics, how we could form partnerships between British universities and centres in the tropics so that the resulting research



Entrance to the old (now demolished) building

MOU between Oxford and Mahidol Universities and the Wellcome Trust is signed on 28th November. Present were David Weatherall, Peter Williams and Chamlong Harinasuta.

1978

programmes would have all the backing of the required fields of medicine and not be limited to those required for the study of communicable disease. We decided that forming genuine partnerships between a university and a centre in the developing world, provided it was sustained for a reasonable time, might be a way forward.

First, Peter was very keen to start out in Africa but for a variety of reasons, I persuaded him that Asia might be an easier place to start. I already had strong working connections in Thailand and Malaysia and my colleagues in the Liverpool Tropical School had also worked closely with groups in Bangkok. I also mentioned to Peter Williams that we had an excellent potential leader of such a development: one David Warrell who was, at the time, a consultant physician at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, but who had already had extensive tropical experience.

So it was that in 1979 Peter, David and I set off for Bangkok to meet the folk from Mahidol. The stress of the journey and stay was somewhat helped by the fact that we flew first class on Thai airlines and were housed in the Oriental Hotel.

Concluding the formal agreement by the Wellcome Trust (Peter William, right) to fund the Nuffield Department of Clinical Medicine (David Weatherall, left) on board the Rice Barge on the Chaopraya River, Jan 1979



Unit opens in May 1979.
David Warrell is Director.

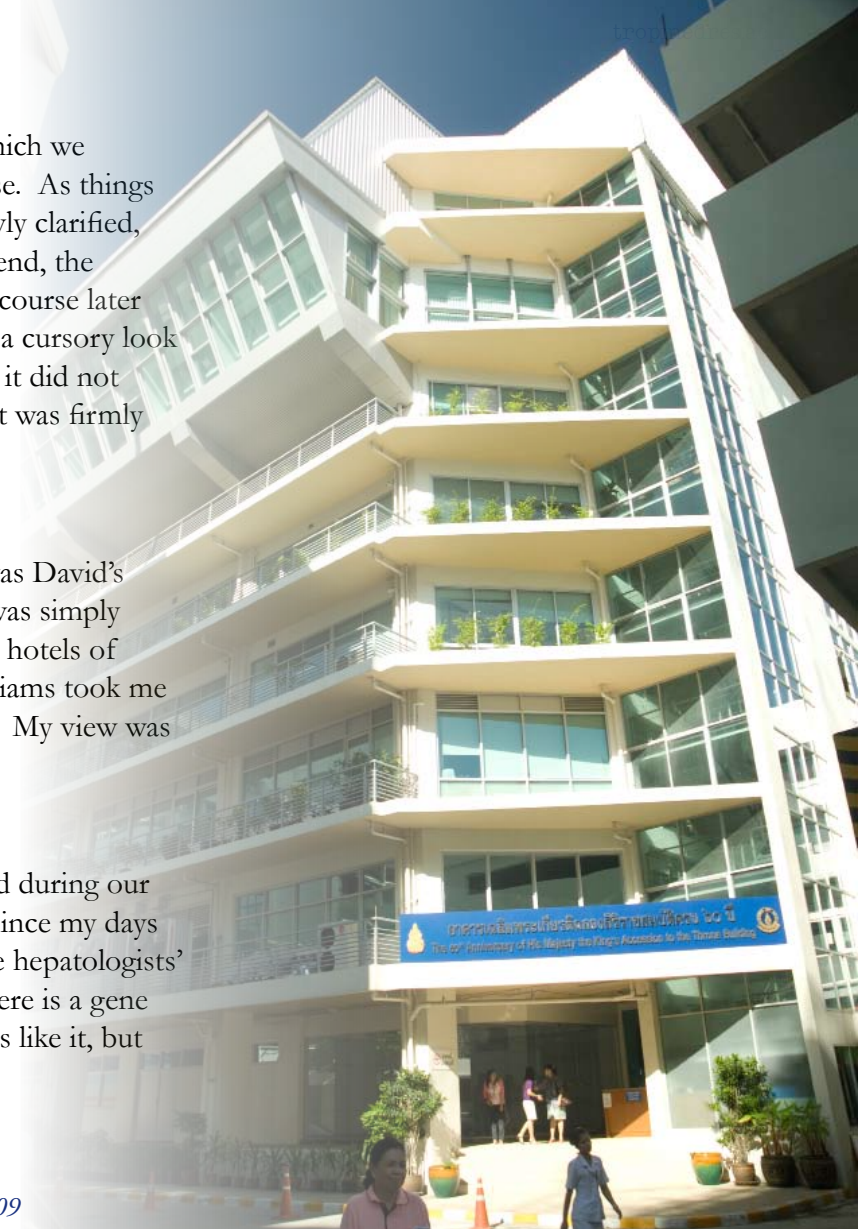
1979

As I remember it, the meeting lasted about two days during which we played a bizarre game of clinical research-related cat and mouse. As things progressed and our wishes for a genuine partnership were slowly clarified, things gradually became more and more promising and at the end, the Mahidol-Oxford-Wellcome partnership was firmed up and of course later signed and sealed. On the way back Peter and David did have a cursory look at the possibility of setting up the programme in Malaysia, but it did not look nearly as promising as Bangkok and so the site of the unit was firmly established.

I have only two other memories of the trip to Bangkok: one was David's continuous murmurings that with his modest background he was simply not used to being in first class compartments in airplanes or in hotels of the quality of the Oriental. As this went on and on, Peter Williams took me aside and asked me whether we should move to another hotel. My view was clear; Warrell could move, but I was staying at the Oriental.

The other memory is of durian. It was durian time in Thailand during our visit and we were constantly plied with it several times a day. Since my days in Malaya, I had hated this fruit; the smell is reminiscent of the hepatologists' 'newly opened grave' and the taste not much better. I think there is a gene for durian susceptibility because I know some of my colleagues like it, but two days of it nearly saw me off.

Entrance to the new building, Jan 2009



Patchari starts



Dexamethasone study starts

1979

1979

David did an extremely fine job in setting up the unit and I was extremely proud of them all when I saw one of the first papers, the *New England Journal of Medicine* piece on the positive harm that can be done by treating cerebral malaria with steroids and the advice for its better management; what a wonderful start! The unit went from strength to strength and, although there were some political ups and downs over the years, the two Nicks who followed built it further to its great standing today. It was undoubtedly the enormous success of the unit that spawned the other fine units based at Oxford, in Vietnam and Kenya.

To be honest, when we left Bangkok in 1979, I thought the unit might last about six months. In the words of one of my favourite, though rather neglected poets Oliver Goldsmith, and quoted completely out of context of course, “Fools who came to scoff remained to pray”.



L to R: Patchari, David Warrell, Nick White, 1981

Nick White arrives

Liz White (Nick's sister) arrives



1980

1980

Wellcome, Mahidol University-Oxford Tropical Medicine Research Programme: inception and early days

David A. Warrell
Nuffield Department of Clinical Medicine
University of Oxford

After spending seven happy years living, researching and travelling in Africa, I tried to settle down as a consultant physician in Oxford where I had been an undergraduate. Mary and I lived in a delightful village in deep countryside south of Oxford but, despite the pleasures of this idyllic existence and the interesting challenges of clinical medicine and teaching some extremely bright and now famous medical students (e.g. John Bell and Alasdair Buchan), I quickly became restless and plotted a return to the tropics.



Peter Williams, Director of The Wellcome Trust, admiring Wat Arun, Jan 1979

I had been fortunate enough to meet two distinguished Thai medical scientists, Prof Visith Sitprija (Chulalongkorn Hospital) and Dr Vicharn Vithyasai (Chaing Mai) who had given me the idea of working in the Far East, perhaps in Thailand. In 1977, Mary and I spent 3 months in West Africa, which further ignited our enthusiasm for research in tropical medicine. Since the Wellcome Trust had sponsored my work in Ethiopia and Nigeria, I dared to approach their man in charge of tropical research, Dr

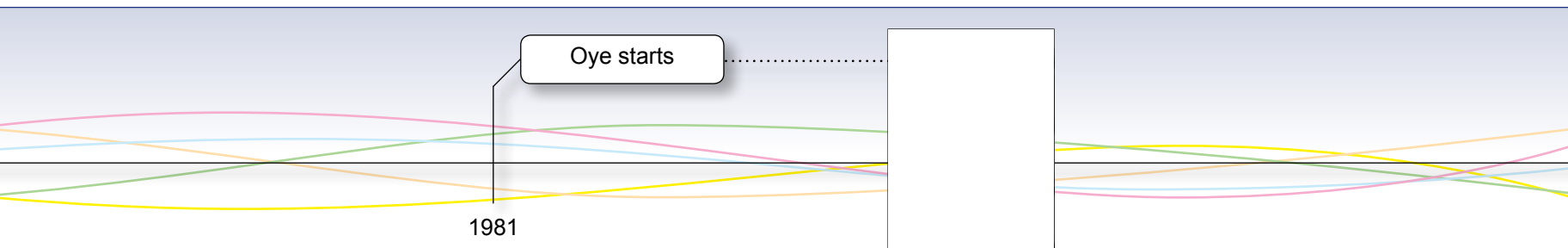
The first Unit publication (Quinidine in falciparum malaria, *The Lancet*, 14 November 1981).

1981

Tom Hopwood, who had been advisor to the Ministry of Health in Addis Ababa when I worked there in 1968. When I first visited Tom in December 1977, there was, behind his desk, a map of the world with flags marking the sites of the Wellcome's tropical dominions: Vellore (India), Belém (Brazil), Nairobi (Kenya) and so on. Remarkably, South East Asia lacked any Trust presence, even though their senior trustee, Dr CE Gordon-Smith, had worked on arboviruses at the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s. Several attractive potential sites for a new Wellcome Tropical Unit existed in this region. Taipei, Jakarta and Manila were eliminated by correspondence but Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand warranted closer inspection.

In May 1978, Mary and I set out on a reconnaissance visit. We were well received and royally entertained in Malaysia at the Institute of Medical Research, Hospital KL, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Gombak Orang Asli and Mantakab Hospitals and Universiti Sains Penang (where I tasted durian for the first time); in Sri Lanka at the University of Peradeniya and Medical Research Institute and University of Colombo; and in Thailand at the Malnutrition and Anemia Unit (MALAN) in Chiang Mai. However, nothing could compare with the welcome we received at the Faculty of Tropical Medicine in Bangkok, thanks to the diplomatic charm of our chaperone, Prof Herbert Gilles, Dean of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. He was a close

The Chantaburi Hills viewed from the roof of PraPokklao Hospital



friend of Professors Brian Macgrath, Prof Chamlong Harinasuta and Prof Khunying Tranakchit Harinasuta, who had founded the Faculty. Thailand was irresistible for many reasons: delightful people, excellent facilities, commitment to clinical research and the existence of many of the diseases in which we were most interested, notably malaria, rabies and snake bite.

Danai Bunnag, Khunying Tranakchit Harinasuta with Mary on our first visit to Chantaburi, 1980

The Faculty immediately offered us office and laboratory space in the hospital.

However, to broker a proper long term collaboration we needed the “big guns”, David Weatherall [Nuffield Professor of Clinical Medicine (NDM) in Oxford] and Peter Williams (Director of The Wellcome Trust) and so I returned to Bangkok with them in January 1979, the first time I had ever travelled first class or stayed at The Oriental Hotel. After several round table discussions with the senior faculty staff, it was agreed that Mary and I could start work in Thailand in November 1979. Our initial Wellcome grant envisaged research on cerebral malaria and the intradermal application of rabies vaccines. They were so concerned that employing Mary to work with me might be perceived as being nepotistic that we had to endure a rather embarrassing tea party with Peter Williams to reassure him that Mary was “all right”. During our last frantic months in England we started Thai language at the School of Oriental and African Studies, visited rabies virus



1982

Lek starts



laboratories (George Turner and Joan Crick) and enjoyed a crash course in parasitological diagnosis with Tony Moody at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Mary moved to Dr James Porterfield's laboratory at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, and I helped to develop a method for measuring cerebral blood flow with Drs Norman Veall and Jonathan Reeve at CRC Northwick Park. A brilliant young Thai neurologist, Dr Prida Phuapradit, happened to be working in Oxford at that time and gave us valuable advice. In what seemed to many friends and family members like an act of insanity, Mary and I resigned our National Health Service jobs, let our cottage, packed up and moved to Thailand. However, thanks to David Weatherall, we retained our links with the NDM, where we had a liaison office supervised by my highly efficient PA, Eunice Berry.

We arrived in Bangkok on November 7th. Within minutes of settling down in our hotel to recover from the flight and jet lag, I was called to the hospital by Prof Danai Bunnag to discuss whether a patient had a sufficiently low Glasgow coma score to qualify as cerebral malaria. The absence of a satisfactory case definition was just one of the many challenges confronting the study of this condition. During our early days in Bangkok, we were befriended and helped by many kind people, notably Prof Khunying, Prof Danai, Prof Tan Chongsuphajaisiddhi, Bob Shaw (Wellcome Foundation), Prof Natth Bhamarapravati (Rector of Mahidol University), Dr Herb Segal (AFRIMS), Dr Denise, Khun Vimolsri, Khun Vorapan and Khun Patra.

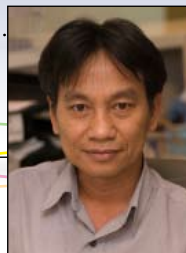
Our regular lunch companions included Drs Aruni, Pravan and Pricha. We started to learn Thai language in earnest at the Union Language School and with Khun Achala, a senior nurse who was later to be the star of our rabies



Jeanne Packer and Eunice Berry in Oxford

Sayan starts

1982



vaccine studies at Queen Saovapha Memorial Institute (QSMI). We joined the Siam Society, enabling us to travel by overnight trains to fascinating and remote places of historical interest and scenic beauty in all parts of the country, accompanied by knowledgeable guides. I began to visit Khun Wirot Nootpand's "Siam Farm" which stocked an amazing array of snakes, many of which were new to me and to the herpetological literature. Home comfort improved dramatically in December when we moved into an apartment on Sukhothai Soi 4, close to Chitlada Palace. In the cool of the very early morning, I joined professional Thai boxers (some going backwards) on their training runs along the footpath surrounding the Palace.

In my diary for 18th February 1980, I recorded a momentous event in the history of the unit: "Khun Patchari Prakongpan starts". Patchari proved to be the perfect secretary, personal assistant, unit manager, friend and loyal supporter. We were so lucky to recruit her from Dr Olson, a biochemist at the Faculty of Science. Apart from organising the furnishing and equipping of the unit office and laboratories, Patchari also found contacts for all our diverse interests, including natural history. She helped us surmount all manner of political, linguistic and practical problems and was instrumental in recruiting our two marvellous laboratory scientists, Khun Kamolrat Silamut ("Oye") and Vanaporn Wuthiekanun ("Lek").

Khunying and Danai were tireless in their encouragement and accompanied (in Danai's spectacular Jaguar car) to meet potential collaborators at Bamrat Naradura Hospital (rabies), QSMI (rabies and snake bite) and Bangpli (snake bite). They delegated a very bright young Siriraj-trained doctor, originally from Kong Kaen, Sornchai Looareesuwan, who was destined to become our most energetic and devoted colleague and companion. He and his family remained close family friends.



Patchari, 1981



Oye



Lek

Rodney Phillips arrives

1983



PraPokkalao Hospital, Chantaburi



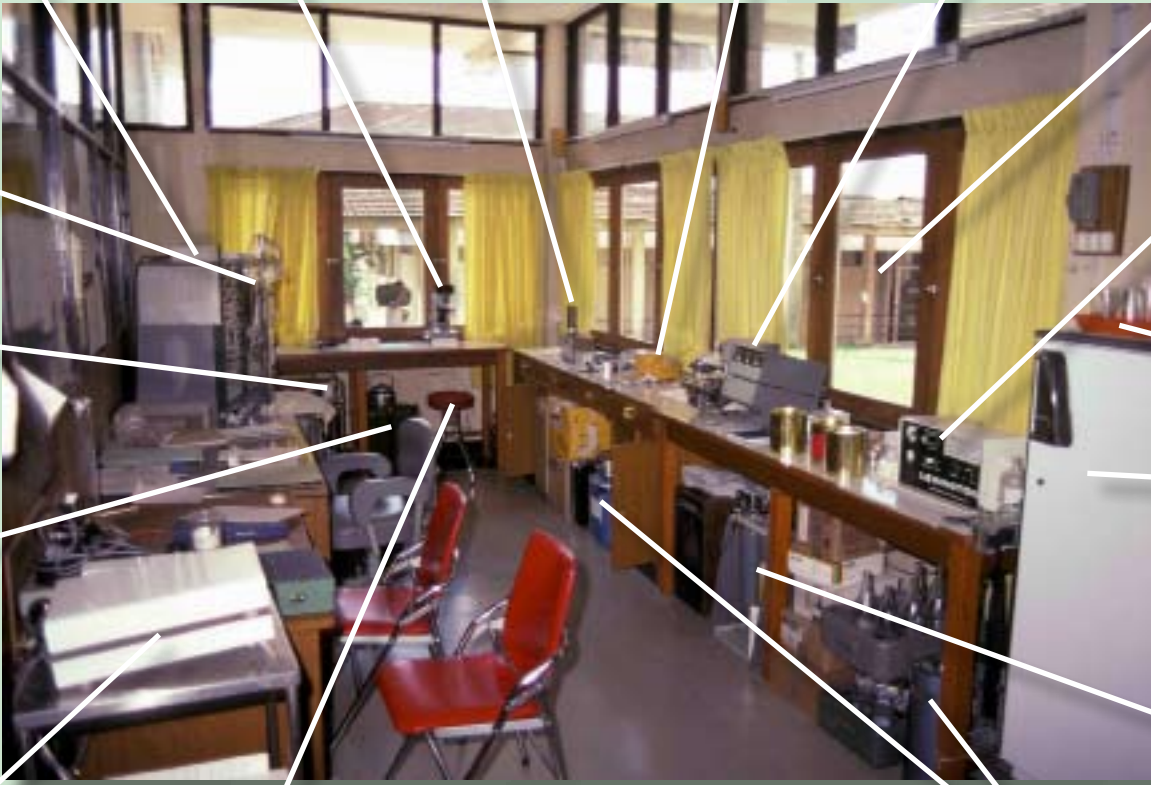
Among Chayangkura na Ayuthaya and two of her colleagues outside the ICU of PraPokkalao Hospital, Chantaburi



In March 1980, Sornchai introduced us to Dr Seri who was attending a course at the Faculty. He reported that Chantaburi, where he worked, was in the throes of an epidemic of cerebral malaria. On 3rd April, 1980, we visited this gem mining town, set amidst hills and fertile orchards. In PraPokklao Provincial Hospital, there were many adult patients suffering from severe malaria. We were extremely fortunate that Dr Chaiyasit Dharakul, the hospital's admirable director, agreed to our making the intensive care unit the site of our first study, a controlled trial of dexamethasone in cerebral malaria. The rest is history.....

Nick White leaves for UK and USA for 2 years

1984



Oye's Leitz microscope

the single sample mini-instruments gamma counter

Sartorius balance

the radiometer mini aquarium nightmare blood gas analyser

the electronics for medicine all singing all dancing haemodynamics console

the outside world

the ready to go pressure transducers

oxygen content analyser - a rechargeable fuel cell

the back-up Honda generator

drinks

oil jerry-cans and kettle to burn down the lab

refridgerator for drugs, food, radio-isotopes and unruly snakes

new kontron ECG monitor

Oye's microscopy stool

off camera - stacked box cages of live highly venomous snakes

cold boxes for sample transfer

calibration gases

Unit laboratory in the ICU in Chantaburi (annotated by Nick White)