

# Sokhann, a woman with diabetes in Cambodia

## Is Sokhann Still Alive ...

Sokhann was 50 when she was first consulted at Kossamak Hospital in Phnom Penh, Royal Kingdom of Cambodia. She lived in Chlong District located at the Northern part of Cambodia, in Kratie Province, some 315 km away from Phnom Penh Capital City.

Contact with her was easier by ringing her cell phone; unfortunately, when recently her diabetologist, Dr. Serey Seng, tried to call her, there was no answer... Did she run out of call credit... Or was she still alive?

Sokhann belongs to the population pyramid stratum of some 50 % of women, living with less than 2 USD per day. Not like her younger fellowcountrywomen of Cambodian modern generation, Sokhann was a conservative household, managing the children daily living, just like younger Sopha, the mother of a 10 years old boy who was victim of type 1 diabetes since he was 7 months old. She sadly told Dr. Serey Seng she could no longer take care of the six children, the youngest being 10 year old.

Her doctor's announcement in 1997 was a shocking news to her: "you are suffering diabetes".

Sokhann had never met a qualified doctor in her life, nor has she seen a qualified diabetes health professional, and least of all a diabetes educator; diabetes and NCD were completely ignored at policy maker level, mostly involved then on communicable diseases (AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis ...).



Picture 1: Sokhann left foot was amputated

So Sokhann, like her 71% fellow country women, was not aware of the « Silent Killer ».

Since then Sokhann lived along with her disease without any treatment, education and follow-up. She could neither go to a diabetic clinic, nor purchase antidiabetic medication, so expensive compared with her husband's daily 1USD earning from the family's ice cream vending bike. Sokhann was already an insulin dependent patient.

To save Sokhann's life, close relatives must, from their own pocket, purchase insulin in a local drug store: a 10ml-vial's cost from 15 to 20 USD, an equivalent to almost the family's monthly income.

Sokhann's health situation became worse. Her husband had to sell the family's ice cream vending bike to get some money to accompany her to Phnom Penh. On 24th May 2005, Sokhann was hospitalized at Preah Kossamak Hospital for septic shock and gangrene of her left foot. Dr. Serey Seng had no other means, except to tell Sokhann: "amputation is a very urgent way to save your life"; at that time, appropriate antibiotics for this kind of gangrene, including insulin, were often unavailable at the hospital.



Picture 2: wounds prevailing on the right foot

Sokhann left foot was amputated (see picture 1).

After amputation, insulin therapy is still needed to maintain blood glucose level adequately controlled for good healing of the surgery wound. The ice cream vending bike has been sold out. What is more dreadful is the gloom future of Sokhann's life, her family's survival, and in particular her children's fate, because the wounds prevailing on the right foot (see picture 2) requires more care, education and follow up, and insulin therapy was mandatory to keep Sokhann alive. If not so, amputation of the right foot will again be the only solution to keep Sokhann alive. Just imagine then what will happen to the young children.

READ PAGE 2

# Is Sokhann Still Alive ...

Sokhann's letter of despair is a poignant call for help.

Ms Theanvy Kuoch, a former Cambodian refugee now residing in the United States, on visit at Kossamak Hospital, donated 50USD to Sokhann who could purchase a few insulin vials that would keep her blood sugar level controlled for a few months. But what would happen thereafter?

Is sokhann still alive...



Picture 3: Women's diabetes foot photographed during World Diabetes Day Walk 2007

Sokhann's case is not an exceptional story. MoPoTsyo is a Peer Organisation; it was a surprise to discover, during World Diabetes Day Walk, many women marching, in spite of their diabetes foot (see picture 3). Dr. Serey Seng, a former experienced surgeon during war time, now a dedicated diabetologist, wants to stop amputating. But he needs to set up a team of trained podiatrists. He is searching for charity organizations to provide insulin to those patients who cannot afford to pay. Insulin For Life is now one international organization to help Kossamak hospital's insulin needs. Moreover, public education on diabetes prevention is an urgent action to undertake: female households and their children should be the target population to educate in order to detoxify the Khmer diabetes myths.



Picture 4: Type 1 boy with his mother, and with Mrs. Hélène Keuky offering a bicycle, school uniforms and notebooks. The type 1 boy will benefit treatment up to 14 years old only

Survey made recently demonstrated that 71% of Cambodian women in their 40-50 years old range suffering diabetes were undiagnosed and 57% of them suffering hypertension, typical risk factors for cardiovascular complications. Furthermore, while developed countries women suffer diabetes mostly at their retirement age (around 64), more than half Cambodian females population in 40-50 years old range become not only economically unproductive, but already a burden to the family, to society, and to the nation.

Sokhann's story is not an exceptional drama; her husband manifested strong ties with the family. But that was not the case for Sopha, a 30 years old mother of a 10 years old boy who was victim of type 1 diabetes since he was 7 months old. Lodged alone with the child (picture 4), as weaver at an NGO small silk factory in Siem Reap famous tourist city, Sopha earns enough monthly pay for the family monthly food and living cost to accompany the child to now nearby pediatric Foundation for follow up; her husband has now gone away, ruined by 10 years traveling and accommodation costs when they lived some 350 km away from the Foundation. "What will I do when my child will reach 15 years old?" – sadly said Sopha. In fact, the Foundation provides diabetes care to children and adolescents only up to 14 years old.



Picture 5: Kanitha's mother (center) lost her job. The type 1 girl has to feed the pigs (pigsty behind her hut) to get 2 hours free lighting at night

Kanitha (see picture 5) looks 8 years old, but in fact was 13. Her parents lived in Takeo province, some 50 km away from Phnom Penh where is located another branch of the Foundation. They had to sell their house and their land to pay travel and accommodation cost to take their type 1 daughter for follow up at the Foundation. The mother lost her job, but the father could up to three years ago go fishing at nearby lake. Now the lake does not exist anymore: buildings are constructed at the site. The family lives now on high interest loans. Chamnan, a 27 years old young woman, grew vegetables with her mother on the bank of Mekong River, nearby Kampong Cham provincial town. Within a few months period, she lost almost half of her weight. She was later diagnosed insulin dependent by Dr. Kuong Sopharin, chief of Kampong Cham Diabetes Clinic (picture 6). She gained back 10 kg in a few weeks, thanks to a 50 USD donation. But she ran out of insulin now...

READ PAGE 3

Diabetes prevalence survey (1) showed 10 per cent subjects suffering diabetes and another 10 per cent suffering impaired glucose tolerance (IGT). Health authorities are now quite aware of the diabetes burden. But when appropriate structures will be in place? In the mean time , one can only raise a few questions: Is Sokhann still alive? Where will Sopha's type 1 son and Kanitha get insulin when they will have reached 15 years old? Will Channan find an insulin donor to keep her alive?

---

REFERENCE: (1) *Lancet* 2005; 366: 1633–39 **Diabetes and associated disorders in Cambodia: two epidemiological surveys**

*Hilary King, Lim Keuky, Serrey Seng, Touch Khun, Gojka Roglic, Michel Pinget*