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% Associated Press
Rue Pasteur 158 #/3
Saigon, Viet Nam

KONTUM--Four USA-styled ya-pogang have a war of their own in this little strife-torn country. They fight it with pills and penicillin instead of politics and gunpowder.

The four "medicine women," in waging their fight against disease and superstition have won the hearts and saved the lives of many of the primitive, uneducated mountaineer tribesmen whom the Communist Viet Cong have tried to win to their side.

"These gals have done more good than millions of dollars of foreign aid," said an American civilian who has worked in the area for four years. "The mountaineers walk from miles around to see them."

The influx of tuberculosis, dysentery, malaria and common cold patients has been so great that the little pink dispensary in this town of 40,000 will be replaced in six months with a forty-bed, four million piastre (US \$55,500) hospital and health center. Funds for the dispensary and hospital were provided by the German Bishops Relief Fund.

The un-headlined story in this country of headlines began about two years ago when Dr. Patricia Smith, formerly of Seattle, Wash., was sent by a Catholic woman's organization to Kontum in the mountainous high plateau region of central Viet Nam. She decided to stay longer.

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"It was hard at the beginning," explained "Doc" Smith--as the Americans here call here. "I had to gain the confidence of the mountaineers. They'd rather have their sorcerer make incantations to drive out the evil spirits."

Driving her red and white ambulance to the dispensary, she continued, "Then one or two a day would come from the neighboring villages. I would treat them at the house--on the porch, in the garden or anywhere I could find space. Now we can't keep up with the demand."

Speaking in a husky voice from a sore throat, the 35-year-old doctor explained, "Superstition is the big enemy. You should have been with me yesterday. Dysentery had plagued for five days some mountaineers who had just built a new village to escape the Viet Cong. They put a symbol of a man with a crossbow above the village entrance gate and offered a water buffalo sacrifice to drive away the evil spirits.

"We give free medical aid to the mountaineers and try to keep the rich city people out. But once in awhile they sneak in on us."

She parked the vehicle in front of the small strawberry-colored dispensary. On the front steps sat a sprinkling of mountaineers from the five tribes: Bahnar, Sedang, Rongao, Jorai and Halong. Doc greeted them in ~~the~~ Bahnar, the only written language. "I know just enough of the others to tell them how to take pills," she said.

Inside the "office" sat, stood and wandered twenty more mountaineers--half-naked children screaming from an injection, unkempt women with blackened teeth, sleeping babies wrapped to their mother's back papoose-style.

Two of the other "medicine women," both nurses, were already at work. Miss Joan Blonien of Milwaukee, Wisc., thin and pale after recovering from hepatitis, was ordering a baby's injection. Miss Helen Perry, a naturalized American citizen from ~~British Columbia~~ British Columbia, was washing her hands after bandaging an infection. She had served as a nurse in the Korean conflict.

The fourth "medicine woman," Miss Jean Platz, was on home leave in Milwaukee, Wisc.

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How many hours a day do they work? They could not calculate the time needed for packing the ambulance for village clinics, for ordering supplies, night-time emergency calls plus an eight-hour day at the dispensary.

What is a typical day in the life of the ya-pogang?

When this reporter accompanied them for the day, Doc started off by making a daily tour of her patients. Four serious cases were sleeping on wooden benches covered with grass mats in the in-patient department.

"We thought this little girl was going to die, but she's still with us," Doc said. "I think she has typhoid. Joan gets up at three every morning to give her shots."

Doc estimated about 75 per cent of the mountaineer children die. She said before she arrived in Kontum no child in one of the villages lived to be older than two.

~~Three advanced~~ tuberculosis cases were also in the room.

"We estimate 30 to 40 per cent of the mountaineers have TB," she said. "Without an x-ray equipment, we can't detect the early stages."

A young ragmuffin boy came in with a note written in Bahnar. Doc Smith laughed as she read it: Please have mercy on the brother of this child and help him. The mother of this child has been here many times, but couldn't come in.

Doc went out the back door into the open-air, "out-patient" department where 15 mountaineers received nursing care in the little grass, roofless bins they had built for themselves under the shade trees. A rail-like woman with advanced tuberculosis pleaded to go home, promising to visit the weekly clinic in the neighboring village.

"But I don't think you'll do it," Doc replied. "It takes you a whole day to walk there."

The small space in the dispensary that was not cluttered with patients seemed to be bulging with bottles. Millions of drug samples in plastic bottles, collected by friends in the United States, were ~~lying~~ lying on shelves, table tops, desks, in buckets and boxes, from where they would be sorted, combined and put into green canning jars or sirup tins.

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Additional medical supplies are received from Catholic Relief Services and medical kits distributed throughout the country by the United States Operations Mission. Other essentials, mostly anti-biotics, are purchased with the balance of the four-some's \$100 after-taxes stipden stipends after each pays \$50-a-month living expenses.

"We don't waste anything," Miss Blonein explained. "We use the small plastic bottles to dispense medicine in. The U. S. military gies us old magazines and we wrap pills in them."

An old man came in complaining about the spot Doc had given him an injection. "We use penicillin that's two years out of date," she said. "It gave him a sore duff for awhile, but it still gets ride of the infection."

Doc said another serious problem was poor sanitary conditions. "We pass out soap like medicine," she said, pointing to a long bar of ~~hamax~~ it. "That costs us five piastres (US seven cents). It would last a mountaineer a week. But a coolie only makes 10 p's a week--and he's not going to spend half of it on soap."

She explained the new hospital would contain a health center to teach the mountaineers elementary hygiene, nutrition and "how to wear surplus clothes when it's cold--not at noontime."

A special maternity section was planned in the new hospital to train young girls to be midwives in their villages.

"Right now a mountaineer woman just squats on the floor and has a baby," Doc explained. "We'll teach young girls to deliver babies on the floor of the huts like always, but in a clean fashion."

Lighting a cigarette, she continued, "If a mother dies in childbirth, the baby is buried alive with the mother rather than let it starve. We'll turn these babies over to a child-care centre on the east coast."

In the afternoon Doc and Miss Blonein set up a ~~rx~~ clinic in Konhodrum, a small village about 30 miles away. When the ambulance drove in, mothers stopped pounding their unhusked rice, grandmothers stopped weaving cotton loinclothes and men stopped braiding the bamboo sidings for their houses.

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Doc handed out vitamin pills to a listless woman, bandaged a young boy's infected foot, diagnosed a baby's sore throat and took a little girl back to the dispensary for a head operation.

Driving home across washboard-rough roads, Doc shifted the diesel land rover ambulance into four-wheel drive and super-low. She pointed to a hilly jungle area along the roadside where only a month before German Embassy officials had been ambushed by the Viet Cong.

"But don't the V. C. bother you," she was asked.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "We give them medicine too. I can't tell who's V. C. and who isn't."