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SNAPSHOT

Life-Saving Malaria Treatment Mobilizes Skeptical Village

A Cambodian father breaks with local superstitions about his son's sickness to become influential malaria worker



As part of the USAID supported community network, Mr. Dara conducts regular health education sessions and malaria screenings, and counsels individual families. / Photo: University Research Co, LLC / Cambodia

“Initially, I did not believe that my son had malaria, but thought that spirits caused his illness. Now I realize it would be better if I referred my son to health facility when he was seen by an outreach team.”

- Mr. Dara, project beneficiary and village health worker

In early 2008, Mr. Oeur Dara, a farmer living in a remote Cambodian village with a high burden of malaria, delayed seeking malaria treatment for his son with high fevers and chills believing that praying to the forest spirits would cure him. A few days later, his son became unconscious and was finally taken to a health center where he was diagnosed with malaria. He was successfully treated and his life was saved. Mr. Dara credits the health center staff with saving his son's life and realized the importance of seeking prompt treatment for malaria, which had almost killed his son.

Malaria strikes about 250 million people around the world every year and kills nearly a million. In Cambodia, malaria is a major public health threat. On the Thailand-Cambodia border, a strain of malaria resistant to artemisinins, the most-effective anti-malarial drug currently available, has developed and threatens the global progress made in malaria control. Furthermore, malaria control in this region has been limited by poor access to remote villages and cultural beliefs that malaria is caused by persons behaving badly with forest spirits.

Since October 2007, USAID assistance has strengthened malaria prevention and control activities in four target provinces in northwest Cambodia through a network of Village Malaria Workers and Village Health Volunteers, delivering diagnosis and treatment to these hard-to-reach areas.

After Mr. Dara's son had recovered, USAID-supported health center staff came to his village to recruit community residents to become health volunteers. Mr. Dara was eager to offer his help. He later became a specialized malaria worker, and continues to work within his community on health education and delivering information on malaria transmission, prevention, the dangers of malaria and importance of seeking treatment early. Mr. Dara is now one of the most active malaria workers in the Cambodian Malaria Control program providing malaria health education, as well as diagnosis and treatment in his village.