

Mental Health in Cambodia: A Presentation By Sotheara Chhim

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On March 15, 2016, Sotheara Chhim, MD, MPM, PhD, Executive Director and Senior Psychiatrist, representing the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), presented at the Long Beach Asian Pacific Islander (LBAPI) Family Mental Health Center. Dr. Chhim shared how TPO's community-based model of intervention combats widespread mental health and substance use issues in Cambodia, a country with a population of 15 million, 50 psychiatrists and one hospital.

During the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), 1.7 million people were killed, including all doctors and those with education. During this time, the only hospital was used as a detention center where citizens were held and brainwashed. Cambodians that did survive the Khmer-Rouge genocide live with ongoing trauma that has trickled

down to subsequent generations. For example, an epidemiological study of 490 Cambodian adults aged 35-75 residing in Long Beach, California, the largest Cambodian community in the US, found that participants experienced an average of 15 different types of major traumas prior to coming to the US, such as exposure to combat, bombings, starvations, slave labor, rape, witnessing atrocities, kidnapping, or murder of family members, and the more traumas a person experienced the more likely they were to have PTSD (Marshall et al., 2005), depression, and physical health problems (Berthold et al., 2014).

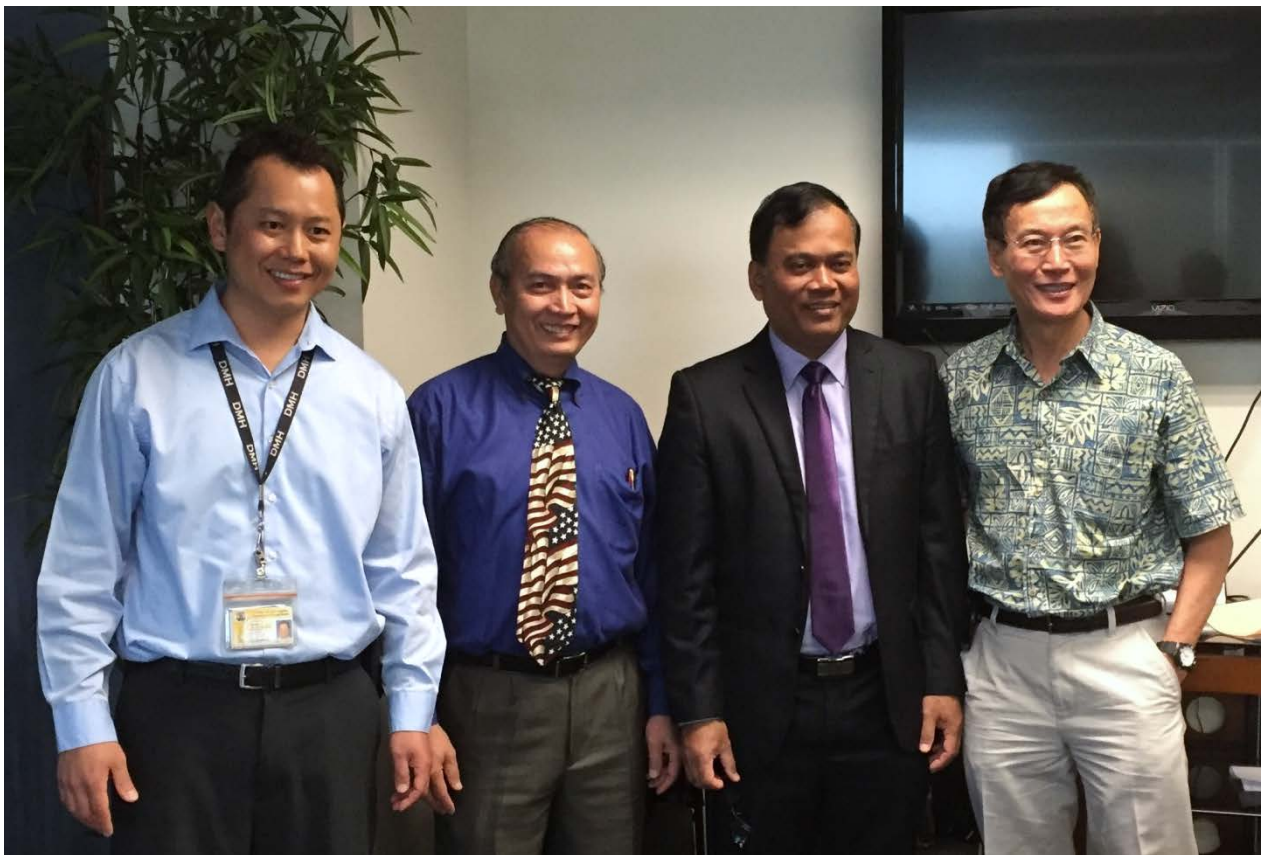


After the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians felt demoralized, confused and depressed. Many became trapped in a vicious cycle of violence, poverty, mental health and substance abuse issues. In the rural areas, many mentally ill individuals are chained to their housing units. Faced with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and history of trauma, many use alcohol or gambling to cope, which then contributes to high

rates of domestic violence and gender-based violence.

The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), funded by non-profit and governmental organizations from various countries throughout the world, has a mission and goal to improve mental health in Cambodia so the people can achieve a satisfactory quality of life. Their approach starts with meeting with community members to understand their needs, what they do to cope, and who they go to for help. Through this process they identify various “community resource people” (the key individuals people go to for help) and educate/train these community resource people about mental health, so they can better assist individuals in need and carry on the work the organization tries to do. Through foreign donations, TPO also funds families in the villages to build small chicken farms and teach them modern techniques to raise chickens or farming techniques, so these families can earn more profits and become self-sustaining, with improved quality of life and mental health.

During the Killing Fields period, Dr. Chhim was sent to a children's detention camp and endured all the hardships that many Cambodians suffered. Later, in 1998, he became one of the first 10 psychiatrists to qualify in Cambodia, and in 2000 received a Master of Psychological Medicine (MPM) from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, and in 2015 received a PhD from the School of Social Sciences from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Dr. Chhim is traveling the world to share TPO's experiences in providing services to communities and individuals in Cambodia. He received the Human Rights Award from the Leithner Center for International Law and Justice, Fordham Law School.



From left to right: Derek Hsieh, Sam Keo, Sotheara Chhim, Song Than