

Vietnamese doctors study for exams

By Dick Piersol

Thirty Vietnamese refugee physicians are progressing toward their Nebraska medical practice licensing through the Vietnamese Physicians' Educational Program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), according to Program Director Dr. Jack Watkins.

Watkins, a professor in the Nebraska Center for Continuing Medical Education, said that before the doctors can practice in the 27 sponsoring communities, they must pass two examinations.

He said that the Education Committee for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) exam, to be offered Jan. 21, is designed to test both English language comprehension and basic medical knowledge and skills. The doctors also must pass a state licensing exam administered by the State Board of Medical Examiners.

Two programs of educational assistance are used to help prepare the physicians for the examinations. Watkins said they are designed to adapt the physicians to American language and culture and to supplement their Vietnamese medical training.

David Dorpat of the state Department of Health, said UNMC started the preparation program soon after the refugees arrived in Nebraska. He said UNMC contracted with Creighton University to provide English language and cultural adjustment training for the doctors and their families.

Phase one

The first phase of instruction began June 23 and ended Aug. 15 when the doctors' families moved to their sponsoring communities, according to a report released by Lloyd Hubenka, project director and chairman of the Creighton English and Speech Dept.

The report said phase one provided 20 to 25 hours weekly in language instruction and five to seven hours per week in cultural orientation.

The report called the first phase successful. It stated testing showed improvements in the doctors' reading, listening and speaking skills. The report also stated that at least seven of the doctors would pass the

ECFMG exam.

The second, less intensive phase of language training began Aug. 23. Two hours of daily instruction focus on medical histories, technical vocabulary and patient interviewing methods.

Hubenka's report cites problems in the language and cultural instruction program. Although the Legislature appropriated \$50,000 for the instruction, the Omaha Public Schools System also is providing funds for the second phase. According to the report, the student-faculty ratio is too high, the project lacks a full-time coordinator and the Omaha Public Schools lack funds to supply materials and instruction for the increasingly technical project.

Federal funds

Dorpat said Creighton and UNMC have applied to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) for federal funds in the resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees. The schools have been reasonably assured the federal money will be available for November through June, 1976, he said. Some of the money spent by the Legislature and Omaha Public Schools probably will be recovered, Dorpat added.

Watkins, UNMC program director, said the medical retraining program is designed to acquaint the doctors with family physician practice in their sponsoring communities. He said the family practice common to Nebraska is much different from the training they received in Vietnam.

Watkins said the doctors all have good backgrounds, but little clinical experience.

Dr. Margaret Faithe, assistant dean for Continuing Medical Education at UNMC, said the doctors are becoming familiar with health care problems they will encounter.

She said the Vietnamese are better at treating infectious diseases than most American doctors but do not have the experience to treat degenerative health problems of the elderly.

Trauma surgery

"In Vietnam, the life span is about 65 years," she said. "Vietnamese doctors consider patients older than that too old to treat. The surgery they've done is almost

all war-related trauma surgery. We are teaching them the kind of reconstructive surgery common in this country. We have also taught them about drugs they have never encountered."

She said the doctors also needed review in basic sciences and medical information peculiar to American health care.

"They needed to know about medical insurance so we visited the Blue Cross-Blue Shield offices," she said. "We're acquainting them with the duties of nurses, physical therapists and physician's assistants. We are planning lectures on malpractice, funerals and the duties of local coroners. Thanks to state Sen. John Cavanaugh, the doctors know a little more about the political structure of the towns they will live in."

Many of the doctors have had specialized training, Faithe said. Their specialties include plastic surgery, ophthalmology, obstetrics, gynecology, endocrinology and pediatrics.

"They are also interested in things like the Equal Opportunity Employer signs written in different languages. We were discussing hypertension among whites and non-whites and they wondered where they fit it. They decided they were non-whites," Faithe said.

Watkins said most of the 27 communities sponsoring the physicians are outstate towns desperately needing doctors.

Those communities are Weeping Water, Clay Center, Humboldt, Albion, Laurel, Loup City, Ponca, Ravenna, Sutherland, Wauneta, Mullen, Wood River, Imperial and Sheldon. Ashland and Norfolk are sponsoring two families and Beatrice is sponsoring three. Families in Lincoln and Omaha are privately sponsoring two doctors.

According to John Sals of the state Department of Health, the Vietnamese physicians will reduce the doctor shortage 30 per cent in northern and west-central Nebraska, where need is most critical.

He said the state needs about 100 doctors in those areas, although statewide shortage is more.

The sponsoring communities have formed an association called Medical Edu-

cational Development in Communities for Vietnamese Physicians (MEDIC), according to Ravenna Mayor Clair Britton.

Britton was elected chairman of that group at a June meeting in Grand Island.

Smooth transition

He said the organization was formed to smooth the doctors' transition from the refugee huts at Camp Pendleton, Calif. to Nebraska.

The relocation began last spring with varying degrees of difficulty and cooperation, according to state Sen. John DeCamp of Neligh.

DeCamp said he had indirect contact with some of the doctors at Camp Pendleton and had known others when he was at Can Tho, South Vietnam.

He said he talked with Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) representatives last spring about resettling some of the doctors in rural Nebraska.

"NPPD checked on the possibilities and got word that if anything was to be done it should be done quickly," he said.

DeCamp proposed that a delegation be sent by the Legislature to recruit the doctors. DeCamp, Sen. Tom Kennedy, chairman of the Legislature's Health and Welfare Committee, and Sen. Richard Maresch received initial approval and went to California.

State Department of Health employees began screening the potential physician recruits and assisted community representatives who wanted to locate physicians, DeCamp said.

The Department of Immigration and Naturalization insisted that only individuals could sponsor the physicians, DeCamp explained, so the communities committed themselves to providing a home and \$500 per month for each doctor and family.

DeCamp said the Legislature then passed the \$50,000 appropriation to start the UNMC and Creighton programs.

He said the Legislature will probably need to provide additional funds next year for living expenses and further education for the physicians, but Nebraska is well in the lead among states that filed for HEW grants.

Refugee problem not new for Vietnamese physicians

By Dick Piersol

Most of the Vietnamese physicians now studying at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) were refugees for the second time when they left South Vietnam before the fall of Saigon on April 30th.

Only three or four of the doctors are native South Vietnamese, according to Dr. Nguyen Huu Tien, a spokesman for the doctors. The other fled Hanoi and other areas of North Vietnam after the Geneva Convention of 1954 divided the nation.

Tien, 45, and Dr. Nguyen Van Thieu, 42, another spokesman also share a background in government service. Thieu, not related to the former South Vietnamese president worked for the Ministry of Health in South Vietnam. Tien was a member of the South Vietnamese Senate.

Tien said there was little organization to the doctors' escape from South Vietnam during the fall of that country. He said most professional people and government officials left less than a week before Saigon was overrun.

Tien said several physicians did not leave Vietnam until after the communist takeover. Most took refuge in Thailand and Korea.

Both doctors said they had visited the United States before arriving at Camp Pendleton, Calif., early in May.

Hospital tour

Thieu said he never was in Nebraska, but had visited Iowa in 1966 on a tour of American hospitals.

Tien said he visited the country three times as a guest of the State Dept. He examined health care in America from what he called sophisticated urban clinic in San Francisco to an American Indian tribal medicine in Gallup, N.M.

Both doctors said that although they were fairly familiar with Americans, the language and cultural orientation offered

by Creighton University helped in adjusting to different surroundings.

Tien said he was worried that his four children might have a difficult time adjusting to America, but found they have made surprising progress. His children and wife are now living in Laurel where he will practice after completing the program.

He said his children are being "Americanized" at a faster rate than he expected. They like hamburgers, Jello and drink a lot of milk, and his sons intend to play football at Laurel High School, he said.

Tien said his children practice on a piano provided for them by a Laurel woman.

Weather adjustment

Both doctors said the only major adjustment was for the weather.

Tien said his family was unhappy with their stay in Camp Pendleton because of the cold weather and Army food, so their first outing was to Disneyland, in Anaheim, Calif.

Thieu's family is living in Imperial and he said his four children are making friends easily. His children were impressed with the Nebraska countryside and their first full-scale hailstorm.

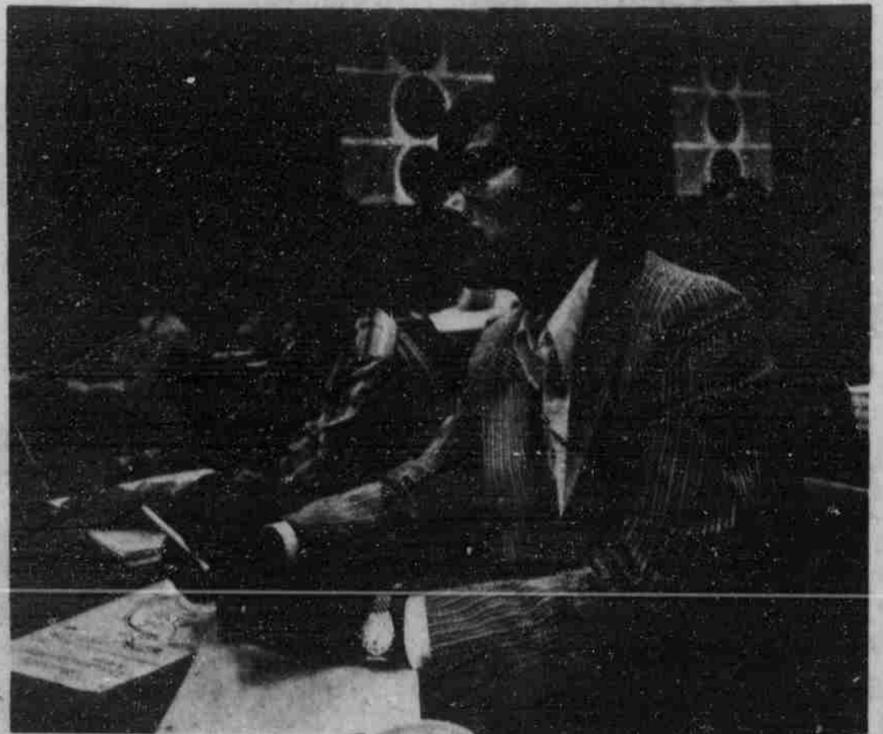
Both doctors said their training in the medical school in Saigon basically prepared them for Vietnamese health problems. They said they were trained to treat infectious, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, venereal disease, skin diseases and gastro-intestinal infections.

They said their retraining for Nebraska's health problems has concentrated on degenerative health problems of the elderly.

Will return

They would like to return to Vietnam, they said, but not until the country is safe for them and their families. Both said they left everything they owned behind, along with many friends and relatives.

The doctors said they were confident



Dr. L.E. Dung, Vietnamese immigrant

Photo by Steve Boerner

that the old order would return to power in Vietnam, but neither could say when that would happen.

Three younger Vietnamese physicians, less acquainted with the United States, are Dr. Le Dung, (pronounced zong), Dr. Le Dzieu, and Dr. Tran Chi, one of the five women in the group.

Le Dung is trained as an ear, nose, throat and pediatrics specialist. His wife and three children live in Ashland. He said he suffered from culture shock the first week in the state, but that his transition has been rapid.

Although he and his colleagues still speak Vietnamese among themselves, he said he is learning to wake each morning in Ashland thinking in English.

His three children have adapted, he said, and have no trouble using English with their friends. The children learned quickly during the summer vacation through

contact with children at swimming-pools, playgrounds and the Henry Doorly Zoo.

He said his adjustment was not easy. He had to learn to use a gas range and adapt to Americans' thinking.

He said he is impressed by the size of the land and most everything in it. He, his wife and two children have discovered the American and Nebraskan joy in team sports. He said he has heard much and is apprehensive about Nebraska winters.

Tran Chi has studied obstetrics and gynecology. She and her husband, also a physician, were impressed by the friendliness of their sponsoring community, Clay Center.

Dr. Le Dung had reservations about Nebraska sports.

"I'm not sure I like this football. It seems an excuse for hitting and hurting people," he said.