

The Year (2023) in Review

2023 was a year when opportunities presented challenges and challenges presented opportunities. In spite of the roadblocks, we continued to strive for equitable access to healthcare in one of the world's most vulnerable, marginalized regions.

The journey to realizing our aspirations was sometimes daunting, but one simple question defined our path forward: "What if?"

Asking ourselves "what if" opened our minds to new ideas and solutions. That one question repeatedly sparked discussions that got bigger and broader, and inspired actions that became more ambitious and more impactful.

We asked...

What if we took cervical cancer screening to refugees, rather than expecting them to come to us?

What if we extended the Physician Incentive Program to additional doctors?

What if we funded the purchase of vital, life-saving medical equipment and supplies?

What if we forged partnerships with organizations uniquely positioned to help us reach more of our target volunteer and patient demographics?

And as we always have, we asked, "What if we think outside the box?"

We questioned what was possible and found the answer in the following outcomes.

We established strategic partnerships with two very high profile organizations: the International Rescue Committee and the American College of Surgeons.

Through the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) we screened 1044 women for cervical cancer and provided potentially life-saving thermal ablation treatment or referrals for 87. But the true fulfillment of our mandate was training 12 doctors, nurses and midwives, some of whom traveled long distances to learn the screening and treatment techniques, with the goal of local sustainability. By expanding our outreach in 2024, we expect to double our impact.

Through the Physician Incentive Program (PIP) we provided financial support, supplies and equipment to 7 doctors working in deplorable conditions, under constant threat of arrest, detention or execution. And yet, they were stalwart in their commitment to their patients, put their lives on the line every day, and would not be deterred.

The subsidy helped to provide medical attention to approximately 25,000 patients. Considering how many suffered war injuries, that statistic is both admirable and appalling. The total expenditure was approximately CA\$20,500, and the approximate cost per patient was \$.82.

It's been said that he profits most who serves best. If that is indeed true, then during the past year, so many in the extended Project HANDS family amassed a fortune in good humanitarian deeds. Those deserving of our humble gratitude include our dedicated volunteers, the courageous PIP doctors, the International Rescue Committee, Mae La Refugee Camp, Mae Tao Clinic, and the American College of Surgeons.

And last, but by no means least, our deepest gratitude goes to an individual who must remain anonymous because of her advocacy for the Myanmar pro-democracy movement. Throughout her life, her father instilled in her the moral imperative of altruism, even – and especially – during times of personal hardship. Taking that obligation to heart, she continues to spearhead the PIP, navigating complex logistics and bureaucracy, with endless compassion and determination. When it comes to helping others, no matter how great the obstacles, she simply refuses to give up. Without her, the PIP would not and could not exist. It was also her introduction to Mae Tao Clinic that ultimately led us to partner with the International Rescue Committee and launch WHI in the refugee camps.

As we enter a new year, at a time when the world's needs are endless and the outlook for many is bleak, let's continue to ask ourselves the question that's more relevant than ever. What if we could do even more?