

At home, Heather and Trevor Smith

Making a world of a difference

Simon Watkinson met employees at McKean Rehabilitation Centre in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand and spoke to Dr Trevor Smith, co-ordinator for TLM Thailand, and his wife Heather, about their 32 years there

Just before we landed, I glanced down at the ramshackle houses and paddy fields basking in the evening sun. The stark contrast between the prosperous, high-rise Singapore, from where I had flown earlier that day, and this part of northern Thailand was almost as breathtaking as the distant wooded slopes.

‘Welcome to Chiang Mai, Simon!’ a smiling Heather Smith greeted me at the carousel in Arrivals and, quickly allaying any fears that I would never see my luggage again, turned to speak to an expectant porter. A short car journey later and we arrived at McKean Rehabilitation Centre, which also acts as a general hospital for the local district and has

a community for about 100 elderly disabled people. Here, Dr Trevor Smith and his wife Heather, who is head of the vocational department, have been enhancing leprosy patients’ lives since 1969.

The next day, meeting some of McKean’s handicraft employees as they beavered away happily at their work was a revelation.

Dee is forty-eight and now works in the shoe department where he makes three

pairs of special sandals a day. When Dee came to McKean to receive treatment for his leprosy, he had no family. Then after accepting Jesus as his Lord and Saviour, it was the first time in his life that he really felt loved. Soon afterwards, with specially adapted tools, he started his apprenticeship. Whilst working

in the craft room he met Rabiap. They married and built themselves a home nearby, with the help of a loan from McKean. They now have two daughters. Dee still experiences recurring ulcers, but said, ‘I am indebted to McKean. If I had to work elsewhere my hands and feet would be even more damaged.’

Rabiap received medication for her leprosy and surgery to correct her clawed hands at McKean and was educated at the school there.

Even though her fingers are still badly damaged, she produces intricate handicrafts and embroidery. She sends samples of these to other disabled ladies to encourage them to also be self-supporting. ‘McKean has saved my life,’ she said. ‘It is my home.’

Forty-two year old Prayong Tapann is married with two



Rabiap, grateful to McKean



Dee in the hospital ward

Leprosy can now be cured with a combination of tablets, multidrug therapy (MDT), which costs just £15 to administer



Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

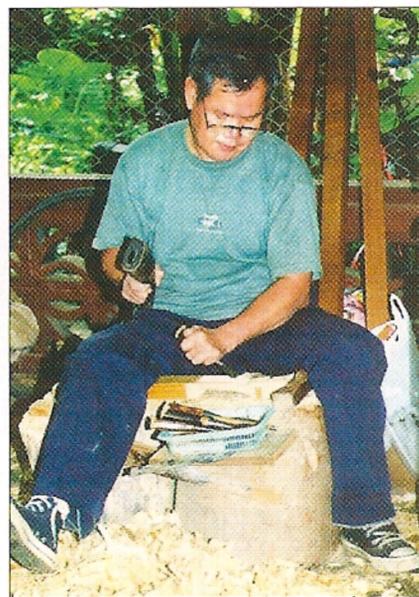
Colossians 3: 23



Prayong, with a steady hand

daughters. When he caught leprosy at fifteen, he came to McKean and was educated there. He spent ten years studying the intricate art of Thai style painting before gaining proficiency (pictured above). Now he paints seven pieces a day, as well as running the busy shop. 'McKean gives new hope to all who come here,' he said.

When Chay was eleven he was diagnosed with leprosy. His teachers and classmates ostracised him, so he dropped out of school. On arrival at McKean some years later, he needed several months' ulcer care and rest in the wards. Then he went to the handicraft department where, after some ex-patients taught him how to carve animals, his skills soon developed.



Chay, hard at work

Chay's vine designs on crosses have been sent to churches around the world and recently, his 'mother and child' carvings were very popular. Overwhelmed by the many orders for his work, Chay explained, 'This is all I know how to do. I am happy when people admire my work. McKean has given me a new life.'

Trevor told me over dinner that his association with The Leprosy Mission (TLM) began as a schoolboy and that his missionary parents had supported TLM's work. Then after graduation from Melbourne University and the obligatory hospital service, he and Heather approached the Director for TLM Australia, who spoke of the need for a GP in Chiang Mai.

'After three months of prayer, we were convinced that this was God's opening, so we applied to serve here,' Trevor remembered.

As co-ordinator for TLM Thailand, Trevor works extensively with outpatients at regular 'skin clinics' in both city and rural areas, as well as caring for in-patients and performing surgery at McKean's hospital. Trevor and Heather are also TLM's representatives in Laos.

'The fear and stigma of leprosy still exists in Thailand,' Trevor told me. 'I don't think leprosy will be eliminated in Thailand in the foreseeable future. The new cases coming across the border will continue until neighbouring countries achieve better leprosy control. Stopping transmission of the disease is impossible as during its long incubation period infectious patients show no signs or symptoms. We must maintain our vigilance and expertise in leprosy detection and treatment for some time to come.'

With most government leprosy workers being re-assigned to other jobs like the treatment of malaria, TB and AIDS, leprosy surveillance is now covered by public health workers with no specific training in leprosy diagnosis and care. To counter this, McKean staff run seminars for public health workers and make regular supervisory on-site visits.

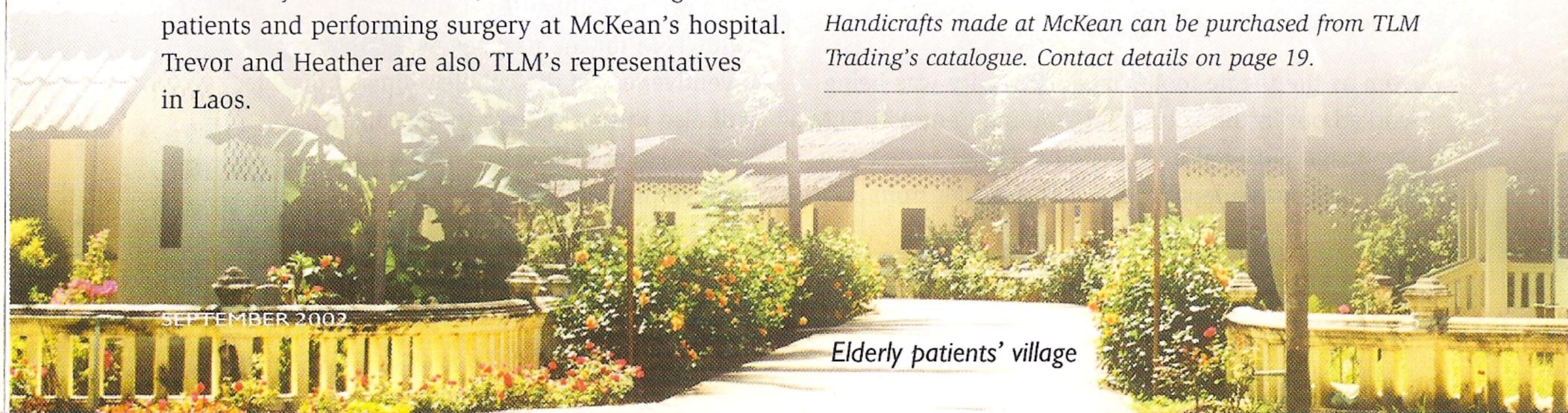
'With more lucrative jobs on offer outside McKean, we have a high turnover of staff here so maintaining it as a centre of excellence will be difficult,' Trevor warned.

He then explained the best part of his job, 'Seeing the change in people's lives as they are assisted to return to normal society as productive members, and especially when they have been "rehabilitated" spiritually through an encounter with the living Lord.'

As we finished dessert and I foolishly mentioned cricket, I noticed Trevor's smile. But, I could just about bear a reminder of the 2001 England Ashes' disaster from a couple whose inspirational lives of dedication have made a world of a difference to so many individuals. ■

Over 11 million leprosy sufferers have been cured using MDT since its introduction in 1982

Handicrafts made at McKean can be purchased from TLM Trading's catalogue. Contact details on page 19.



Elderly patients' village