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Taiwan's assistance in providing oral care for special needs patients in New South Bound countries

KEYWORDS

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Oral health care for individuals with disabilities is often overlooked in general dentistry. The specialty that focuses on disability and oral health is known as special needs or special care dentistry.¹ According to a survey of the healthcare status of special needs patients in Southeast Asian member countries, the reported prevalence of disabilities is highest in the following three countries: Indonesia (8.0%), Vietnam (7.8%), and Timor-Leste (4.6%). Additionally, Thailand has a disability prevalence of 2.2%, and the Philippines is at 1.6%.² The participation of special care dentists (SCD) is very limited, with the highest number in Malaysia, totaling 11, and out of these, 5 are currently undergoing training. SCD in other southeast Asian countries are distributed as follows: 3 in Indonesia, no data available for Vietnam, 2 in Thailand, and 2 in the Philippines. This indicates that resources for special needs oral healthcare (SNOH) are noticeably limited in southeast Asian countries.²

In Taiwan, as early as 1996, the Department of Health established disabilities dental clinics to provide medical services. In 2000, special needs dentistry service demonstration centers were established in the northern, central, southern, and eastern regions of Taiwan. These centers not only provided medical services for individuals with special

needs but also increased the training of dentists in the field of special needs oral healthcare. In 2022, Taiwan's Ministry of Health and Welfare (TMHW) established the specialty of special needs dentistry,³ further enhancing the provision of comprehensive healthcare for individuals with special needs, and integrating it into the Taiwan's national health insurance system.

Taiwan's well-established implementation of SNOH has resulted in substantial experience and accomplishments. Consequently, in 2018, TMHW launched the "New South Bound Special Needs Patients Oral Care Project." This project, executed by Chung Shan Medical University, aimed to extend Taiwan's model of SNOH to southeast Asian countries. By promoting the spirit of humanitarian healthcare, the hope is that southeast Asian countries will also start giving attention to the dental diseases and care of individuals with special needs.

Since 2018, TMHW has been promoting and assisting SNOH activities in southeast Asian countries. The outcomes of this project are as follows: Four countries and six universities participated in this project. A total of 245 dentists, dental assistants, or support staff were trained, and a total of 82 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) for medical health care agreements and 15 MOUs for cooperation agreements were officially signed to establish a network for the referral of special needs oral healthcare in the region (Table 1).

The promotion of this project has garnered appreciation and enthusiasm from the participating countries, as they express gratitude to the Taiwanese government for its dedicated efforts in this humanitarian healthcare endeavor. Three of these countries have already incorporated SNOH into their university curricula, allowing dental students to receive foundational education in this field. It is believed that with this foundation, southeast Asian

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Table 1 The results of Southeast Asian countries' participation in the New South Bound Special Need Patients Oral Care (SNPOC) project led by the Taiwan Ministry of Health and Welfare from 2018 to 2023.

Country	Joined university	Number of trained dentists/assistant	Number of MOU signing on MHC/RN	Integrated SNPOC in curriculum
Philippines	2 (Manila Central University; Our Lady Fatima University)	108/41	12/7	2
Thailand	2 (Mahidol University; Chiang Mai University)	66/49	6/4	2
Indonesia	1 (University of Indonesia)	56/22	5/4	1
Vietnam	1 (Hanoi Medical University)	15/10	2/0	0
Total		245/82	25/15	5

MHC: medical health care.

RN: referral network.

MOU: Memorandums of Understanding.

countries will make significant progress and development in the provision of healthcare, education, and policies related to special needs oral healthcare.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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