News
Q&As



Sr. Josephine Huynh Thi Ly (center) and another nun inject a patient at the Central Hospital in Hue in April 2023. (Joachim Pham)

by Joachim Pham

Correspondent

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Hue, Vietnam — April 30, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

***Editor's note**: Global Sisters Report, the dynamic online community that reports on and gives voice to Catholic women religious around the world, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Join us as we take another look at stories and columns published in 2014 with new updates and reporting.*



St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Josephine Huynh Thi Ly has been offering medical care and emotional support to people with HIV/AIDS at the state-run Central Hospital in Hue since 1997.

Ly, of Da Nang Province of St. Paul de Chartres, was one of the first five St. Paul de Chartres sisters who volunteered to work for the only hospital in central Vietnam that provided medical treatment to HIV/AIDS patients. At that time, local people, including health care workers, would not work with the patients for fear of HIV infection.

The Catholic Church and other local religions have still not been allowed to provide health care and education services since the country was reunified under communist rule nearly half a century ago. Most of their former facilities were confiscated by the communist government, and some turned into public hospitals and schools.

However, many Catholics have been recruited to state-owned agencies and organizations and given senior positions thanks to their hard work and dedication.

Ly, 83, said the hospital officials highly appreciate the nuns' commitment and allow other nuns to serve the increasing number of HIV/AIDS patients.

"We offer tender loving care to patients, so the number of dead patients has fallen dramatically for the past 10 years," she said.

Staff and patients call her "Granma Ly." She and the other sisters care for hospital patients on weekdays and visit their homes on weekends.



Sr. Josephine Huynh Thi Ly checks the medical records of patients at the Central Hospital in Hue in April 2024. (Joachim Pham)

Ly also heads the community with 20 members in the former capital of Hue. They offer free food to 130 patients and their relatives at the hospital daily.

She was born into a Catholic family in Quang Nam province and has four siblings. She entered St. Paul de Chartres in 1960 and started to care for tuberculous patients in 1974.

The Center for Disease Control based in Thua Thien Hue Province recorded 518 people with HIV/AIDS, 80% of them men, in 2023. The number of new patients is increasing year after year. Most of them are infected with the disease through sex with men and drug abuse.

***GSR*: Now you are 83, how are you still engaged in the hospital ministry?**

Ly: Well, I have voluntarily cared for HIV patients at the hospital without being paid for 24 years. In 2001, when I was 60 years old, the hospital officials told me to retire, but I wrote to them to allow me to work there until my health did not allow it. And they accepted. Thank God.



HIV3: Patients and their relatives wait to receive breakfast from the nuns outside the Central Hospital in Hue on March 13, 2024. (Joachim Pham)

Our St. Paul de Chartres sisters do not retire because of old age. We only stop working when we are unable and then enter rest homes.

I thank God for keeping me in good health, as many of my peers died or are bedridden in nursing homes.

I am in love with poor patients and absolutely delighted to work at our former hospital, where I used to serve tubercular patients.

My motto to serve patients is, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Please share with us the ways you keep yourself in good health.

I lead a simple life and keep peace of mind by walking to church and working every day. I relax and seek harmony with the environment by looking after bonsais and growing vegetables and flowers in the convent's garden after work.

I am in the habit of getting up at 4 a.m., taking a nap after lunch, hitting the hay at 9 p.m. and keeping a punctual diet.

I have only caught the flu a few times in the past 10 years. That's it.



St. Paul de Chartres sisters and volunteers offer free bread with meat, vegetables and sauces to patients and their relatives at the Central Hospital in Hue on March 10, 2024. (Joachim Pham)

Please tell us your experience in dealing with patients.

Those admitted to the hospital suffering from HIV are in terrible shock and easily angry with others due to pain, loneliness and depression. They are extremely disappointed with themselves and want to die soon.

Many beg in panic, saying, "Save me, Sister!" That really touches our hearts, so we try our best to calm them down and ease their pain.

We patiently sit by them for hours, listening to their emotions, fears and worries and comforting them with our kindness and sympathy.

We encourage them to accept their conditions and work actively with doctors and nurses to receive medical treatment so they can recover soon and return home for a family reunion.

Many patients appear indifferent to life because they are abandoned, treated badly and discriminated against by their families and communities.



Sr. Anna Dang Thi Nhung visits and gives gifts to a patient at her house in Hue on March 10, 2024. (Joachim Pham)

We treat them like our relatives, cleaning their ulcers, changing their clothes, feeding those who are unable to eat by themselves and helping them take their medication. Consequently, they feel respected, loved and good, and they are determined to look after themselves and adopt a positive attitude to life. They recognize us as Catholic sisters and put their trust in us to heal them.

In our experience, we should serve our brothers and sisters with love and respect.

Do you also care for outpatients?

Yes, we and lay volunteers, pay regular visits to some 100 patients at their homes on the weekend, helping them take medicine on time and offering them free food, clothes and even health insurance. Those in fine shape are also given vocational skills to work for a living and support their families. We also offer coffins to the dead, pay our last respects to them and console their relatives.

As a result, the number of people who died of HIV/AIDS in the past decade has decreased markedly – less than 10 deaths per year.

Some patients volunteer to take care of seriously ill patients at the hospital to show gratitude to us.

Our efforts came to fruition with 17 people embracing our religion in the past decade. Numerous others find meaning and dignity in their lives. We are happy that our hard work and dedication to patients really inspire many doctors and nurses to serve patients better.

Advertisement

How many sisters are working at the hospital?

In 1997, four sisters and I voluntarily started to provide medical treatment to patients with HIV/AIDS at the hospital. Later, three of us were assigned to do pastoral activities in other provinces. Sr. Marie Nguyen Thi Hoan and I are still working as nurses in the infectious ward, which has 50 staff members.

Five novices from our convent are also allowed to help us care for hospital patients.

We are in harmony with the ward staff – 30 people without faith, 13 Buddhists, six Catholics and one Protestant.

We offer medical care to 160 patients with HIV/AIDS, dengue fever, malaria, sepsis, encephalitis, meningitis and hepatitis.

Additionally, the hospital executives allow Dr. Sr. Maria Nguyen Thi Kim Hoa to work as deputy head of the Pediatric Center of Oncology-Hematology-Marrow Transplantation.

Hoa is a member of the Filles de Marie Immaculée. She was awarded a Ph.D. in the application of autologous stem cells in support and treatment for childhood solid tumors on Feb. 23, 2024, by the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Hue.

This is a good opportunity for us to dedicate ourselves to hospital ministry and bear witness to Christian values.

This story appears in the **GSR at 10 Years** feature series. View the full series.