



One meeting helped ADA NSW member Dr Cecilia So embark on a life-changing project improving oral health for hundreds of thousands of children in Cambodia. **Stuart Turner** explores this inspirational story.

## Big dreams, big impacts



*It's made me appreciate that we are not going to get far as human beings and dentists if we just focus on ourselves, our houses or our practices. You live better when you're not focusing on yourself."*

After graduating from The University of Sydney's Bachelor of Dental Surgery course with Honours and backpacking around the world, Dr Cecilia So was seeking a new challenge.

Attending a fundraiser hosted by noted humanitarian and philanthropist Paget Sayers one day in 2005, then 25-year-old Dr Cecilia – "a born idealist" in her own words – found the exact inspiration.

"I had done all this dentistry training and I was looking for a purpose," ADA NSW member dentist Dr So said. "Money at that point in life wasn't important to me – I just wanted to dream big.

"I heard Paget mention teeth during his presentation. Afterwards I went up to him and said, "I'm a dentist, I would love to volunteer but I can't offer any capital – but I can offer a lot of energy.

He said, 'tell me what you want to do and I'll pay for it.' I thought, 'this is awesome!'"

With huge help from an assortment of volunteer dental practitioners, donors

and assorted helpers, Dr So has overseen the installation of three dental clinics which have helped tens of thousands of Cambodian schoolchildren access oral health treatment.

Her work has been part of the multi-pronged joint YourAid / Buddhist Library Cambodia Project (BCLP), which has provided other services such as fresh drinking water to hundreds of thousands of pupils in the south-east Asian country.

"I'd probably give the 25-year-old me a pat on the back at least for daring to be a dreamer," Dr So, who has also tutored and inspired future Cambodian dental practitioners among other efforts, said. "It's been a wonderful journey."

### Focusing on others

A successful businessman and Buddhist, Paget Sayers – who passed away in 2018 – established the BCLP to help Cambodian schoolchildren in the wake of the country's civil war.



*Cecilia (fourth from right) and some of the Cambodian project assistants.*

Dr So established an initial clinic in the southern city of Kampot, with a combination of friends and other helpers donating and shipping over dental chairs and other necessary equipment from Australia.

"I had about US\$2000 in donations and everything was done through a combination of networks and connections I made," Dr So said. "I discovered there are lots of people out there who want to help others.

"I think if you look outside from yourself, you can meet people for whom money or buying a house in an exclusive



*The project has helped bring clean drinking water to Cambodian children.*

area of Sydney isn't the most important thing to them.

"It's made me appreciate that we are not going to get far as human beings and dentists if we just focus on ourselves, our houses or our practices. You live better when you're not focusing on yourself."

Local dentists were enlisted to run the clinic, with Dr So also recruiting Australian practitioners to assist where possible.

"I remember treating children with huge abscesses and jaw disfigurements and kids who were HIV positive," Dr So said. "You worked with other NGOs to give what help you could.

"The whole experience has taught me how in the 'western world' we really do take our oral health for granted."

As part of the project, Dr So and her colleagues also attended local schools to help oversee daily 'brushing sessions.'

"Every morning a big gong set up in the courtyard would 'bong' and the schoolchildren would rush to class," Dr So said. "We'd hand toothbrushes out, wash them brush their teeth and then collect the brushes in again for the next day.

"If the children took the brushes home then you never knew where they would end up or what else they would be used for. Many of the children were from families only earning the equivalent a couple of dollars a day.

"A simple health initiative like getting kids to brush their teeth has helped change their lives."

### Busting myths

Clinics have subsequently been established in two other areas of Cambodia, Kampong Speu and Takeo, with a mobile dental van providing additional services. Free transport is also provided to the children to visit the clinics, which provide treatment including scaling, extraction and restoration.



*Dr Cecilia So says helping transform Cambodian patients' oral health has been a life-changing experience.*

Working with the Cambodian Ministry of Health, project members have visited local health centres to apply fluoride to the kids' teeth. Other work has also included petitioning for healthier treats for the children and helping dispel oral health myths.

"Some local parents thought that if your child had a tooth extracted, they would go blind," Dr So said. "We had to persuade them this wasn't true.

"The school tuck shops were serving flavoured ice sticks, which were basically sugar on a stick. There's parallels with Aussie kids being saturated with sugary drinks. We worked to have healthier things served instead.

"Everyone has a mobile phone, so we got the kids to take pictures of their smiles and gave prizes for the 'best' one. We also developed a marketing strategy for the older kids promoting how good teeth can help you with things like getting a job and a boyfriend/girlfriend."

Other initiatives over the years have included distributing dental health kits to children and establishing apps to discover more data about local oral health habits, informing future research.

A surgical dentist with expertise in dental implants and wisdom teeth, Dr So has also educated local students on her specialist area.

"I see the students on Facebook wearing their suits presenting about implants at national level and I'm so proud of them," she said. "I feel sometimes like I just had the match and lit a spark and then this whole group of people stoked the fire."

### 'Follow your dreams'

Dentistry is one aspect of the Your Aid project, which overall has helped about 900 schools with more than 200,000 students to access clean water and installing water purification systems. Other work has included providing hand washing facilities and teaching English and computer skills.

Dr So now works in private practice in Strathfield – "I've embraced 'normal' life now," she said with a smile – as well as a Senior Dental Officer at The Westmead Centre for Oral Health.

A Clinical Associate at The University of Sydney with a special interest in oral implants, Dr So attends the clinics once a month "just to do my part, meet new people and share ideas". She also presents ADA NSW CPD's *Surgical Dentistry for the General Dentist* course.

"I'm really a small cog in the overall wheel now," Dr So said. "The people on the ground there are the real heroes.

"I love being a dentist but my work in Cambodia gave me a purpose.

"I think as we get older we say, 'I can't do that', whereas when you're younger don't feel the danger of failure. You just think the world is your oyster – you just dream and it will happen."

"Whatever their project of interest, I'd tell a dentist that there is more to life than work. Follow your dreams."



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