

The Volunteer Connection

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Pictured Drs. Rajeev Sharma, Melanie Thomas, and Soniya Dulal | Photo courtesy of Samson Productions

“Our division of medical oncology now treats thousands of patients. Thank you for helping us start from scratch and for standing by us as we built a center of excellence. We are not just treating cancer, we are building a future.”

- Soniya Dulal, MD, DM



Health Volunteers Overseas
Transforming Lives Through Education

Letter from the Executive Director



Dear friends,

For nearly forty years, Health Volunteers Overseas has worked alongside health professionals around the world with a simple but powerful belief: respectful collaboration builds lasting change. What began with a small team concentrating on sharing knowledge of orthopaedic practices has grown into a global network of partnerships rooted in trust, friendship, and mutual learning that spans well over a dozen health care specialties.

In this issue, you will read about the many years of progress of our mental health education project in Bhutan, the continuation of a robust and supportive collaboration expanding oncology care in Nepal, and the beginning of our new hospital administration project in Cambodia. These stories reflect our commitment not only to clinical education but also to strengthening leadership, systems, and resilience.

Meaningful progress does not happen overnight. It is built over years through shared goals, open exchange, and a willingness to both teach and learn. Our volunteers bring expertise, but they also gain new perspectives. Our partners share their realities, their ingenuity, and their commitment to caring for their communities. Together, we create something stronger than any one institution could build alone.

As we reflect on the extraordinary advancements made possible by partnership, we are grateful for the many volunteers, donors, coordinators, and host institutions who make this work possible. The relationships you support are not transactional; they are transformative. They endure, deepen, and continue to send ripples through communities long after a single workshop or site visit has ended.

Thank you for being part of this community and for believing in the power of collaboration carried out with humility and respect. We look forward to continuing this work together for many more years to come.

Sincerely,

April

April Pinner, MSPH, RD
Executive Director

“We never know what will come our way, as COVID showed us. I think expanding your vision is very important. For both sides. When you go places where people have access to better technology and resources, you will get to see people doing things you rarely have a chance to do. Repetition builds excellence. But it’s also very important to see people managing without access to the same resources. They are still treating their patients as best they can with what they have. As doctors, we always face inconveniences and things we don’t expect. We need to be ready for challenges. Having these volunteer experiences, learning from other people, this is the best way.”

– Dr. Rómulo Silva, orthopaedics, Paraguay



The Development of Mental Health Care in Bhutan

HVO's mental health project in Bhutan has been operating for sixteen years. Dr. Chencho Dorji, the country's first psychiatrist, and only one for many years, served as the first HVO on-site coordinator. For many years, he worked alone, treating patients and providing basic training to doctors and nurses working at Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital (JDWNRH). Over time, with guidance from visiting HVO volunteers, local capacity grew to the point where the hospital was able to open its first inpatient ward. By 2010, Dr. Dorji was joined by another Bhutanese psychiatrist. Now, the hospital has its own residency program volunteers help with. "Psychology is very new to Bhutan," said Dr. Dorji. "We need to show the people that we are effective. One of my main aims in bringing western professionals to Bhutan is to show everyone that mental health is not just psychiatrists - it is a multidisciplinary team. Older volunteers from abroad share with our new, young generation all that they have learned from spending their whole lives in this field." HVO's partnership has also proved helpful in making connections for the already overworked department. "We can't recruit volunteers on an individual basis ourselves," explained Dr. Dorji. "It is difficult for us to vet each one. We need an organization with a process. It's much easier if they go through HVO."

One HVO volunteer, Dr. Steven Sonnenberg, has been visiting annually since 2019, with a break during the COVID-19 shutdowns. After retiring, he was looking for ways to stay active in the field and was attracted to Bhutan, its way of life, and its Buddhist culture. Even in just six years, Dr. Sonnenberg witnessed



Photo courtesy of Dr. Steven Sonnenberg

big changes. "When I first came here," he said, "there were two senior psychiatrists in the country - Dr. Chencho Dorji and Dr. Dambar Nirola. A third was studying in Australia and two residents were in Sri Lanka. At that time, the country's first two locally-trained psychiatric residents were completing residency in Bhutan. When I came back in 2023, there were two residents and three psychiatrists in Bhutan. In 2025, there were four residents. Capacity has increased substantially. The two residents who had been studying abroad have returned. One was just posted in the south of the country - he will be the first psychiatrist outside of the capital."

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health care as people dealt with isolation and fear. Bhutan's queen personally took up the issue, spearheading a new national agency called PEMA which is responsible for establishing mental health services across the country. She led the effort to develop a new 200-bed drug and alcohol unit and increased the number of child protective and family intervention workers. "Their majesties are deeply respected and revered by the people of Bhutan, reverence earned by enlightened leadership and active involvement in the lives and welfare of the Bhutanese," said Dr. Sonnenberg. Since the creation of PEMA, Bhutan's national budget for mental health services has grown from three million Nu to nearly one billion. This has resulted in new, much-needed facilities such as a rehabilitation facility and a new psychiatric hospital with dedicated beds for children.

Continued on page 4

The Development of Mental Health Care in Bhutan

Despite these remarkable strides, there is still a shortage of practicing, experienced psychiatrists. This is an area where HVO volunteers can provide critical support. With the consultant psychiatrist busy handling the ever-increasing clinical case load, the faculty has limited time for interns and residents. “I have the time to spend with them one-on-one,” said Dr. Sonnenberg. He dedicates the bulk of his visits to the residents and counseling students, providing lectures, hands-on training, and mentorship. One day, these residents will become psychiatrists who will be capable of training the next generation. The more trained faculty, the more new residents the department will be able to take on in the future.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Steven Sonnenberg

“This year’s lecture series focused on mindfulness meditation as an element of professional development, drawing on the rich Buddhist culture of Bhutan,” said Dr. Sonnenberg. “Previous lecture series covered dialectic behavioral therapy and motivational interviewing. Throughout, I have made it a point to explore the nature of the

therapeutic encounter, emphasizing interviewing skills, diagnostic formulation, and insight into what we personally bring to each therapeutic encounter. Perhaps most gratifying is the occasional comment from a previous trainee to the effect of, ‘I remember you doing that with a patient, and it has had a lasting impact on my own practice.’ Possibly the biggest impact comes from the time I have to spend with the students and residents. Relatively free of clinical constraints, I am able to leisurely interview patients jointly with the trainees, help them formulate cases and explore alternative perspectives. It’s a mutual luxury that is always much appreciated.”

Dr. George Cuesta made his first volunteer trip in the summer of 2025 and worked closely with Dr. Ugyen Dema, the head of the department. Dr. Cuesta is a psychologist with experience counseling veterans, a path he chose after years of service in the United States Army. During his visit, he gave weekly lectures, which received positive and enthusiastic engagement. He also provided consultations and guidance to clinical counselors and psychiatrists.

Hospital staff had asked Dr. Cuesta to cover cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). When everyone showed enthusiastic interest in learning more, Dr. Cuesta provided five more lectures. Additionally, he lectured on disability and mental health, mindfulness, motivational interviewing, and cognitive restructuring. “There are no psychologists in Bhutan,” said Dr. Cuesta. “The professionals who end up providing psychotherapy are the clinical counselors. They have had some education in psychotherapy, but they were lacking education in particular techniques and were especially interested in learning more about CBT. My hope is they will now be able to proficiently implement the technique with patients. It has been empirically shown by research to be an effective intervention for patients with anxiety and other issues. I also focused on establishing rapport with patients. Patients will listen more, have confidence, and trust you. That’s so important.” Two of the clinical counselors reported to Dr. Cuesta that following his training, they felt more comfortable, confident, and were interacting more effectively with patients.

The Development of Mental Health Care in Bhutan

Dr. Cuesta also had the opportunity to engage individual staff members in psychotherapy to provide firsthand experience with therapy techniques. “Overall, this has been a very positive experience for me with Health Volunteers Overseas. The team in Bhutan was one of the best clinical teams I have ever worked with in my entire career. I love the work I do. It doesn’t feel like work to me. It’s joyful, meaningful, purposeful. I think the work we are doing as members of HVO is extremely beneficial for the continued development of Bhutan’s relatively young mental health program.”

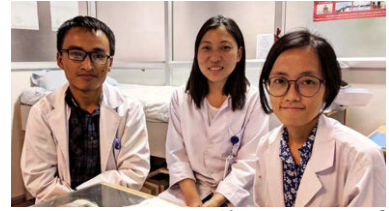


Photo courtesy of
Dr. Steven Sonnenberg

Dr. Cuesta took his first trip last year, while Dr. Sonnenberg took what is likely his last trip with the project. Dr. Sonnenberg said, “This has been an opportunity for me to look at what I do and what I’ve done to articulate the experience and philosophy I’ve developed. It’s a way of understanding what my career as a psychiatrist has been and what it means and how it has shaped me. Sharing that with new doctors has meant a great deal to me. I have rarely felt so welcome anywhere as I have in Bhutan. When you are where you normally practice, there are assumptions that you will do your job just because it’s your job. As an HVO volunteer, they know this isn’t your job. They recognize the sacrifices you’re making to come, and they appreciate it. It is life changing to come and experience this.”



Photo courtesy of
Dr. Steven Sonnenberg

Dr. Dorji shared, “Dr. Sonnenberg is devoted. He knows what’s going on here. He knows what is required and prepares himself. He has an interest in Buddhism and mindfulness.” Dr. Sonnenberg reflected, “HVO has made a small but critically significant contribution. Small in terms of the big picture, but very big in terms of the effects on individual clinicians. Our work here has probably changed the trajectory of a number of individuals’ careers.”

On-site coordinator Dr. Ugyen Dema said, “HVO has definitely helped us. We learned a lot from them, and their volunteerism would continue to benefit us. As we all know, in psychiatry, we need to take a multidisciplinary approach. We have psychiatrists and clinical counselors, but we still need other disciplines. The younger psychiatrists also have exposure to psychotherapy, and we are trying to improve further on it. We always say that a combination of pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy works better than one alone.” To learn more, contact Program Manager Lauren Franklin at l.franklin@hvousa.org.

BUILD. INVEST. ADVANCE. TRANSFORM.



Photo courtesy of
Dr. Steven Sonnenberg

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Make a gift today at <https://hvousa.org/hvo-volunteer-connection-gift/> or scan the QR code.



From the Desk of Dr. Chencho Dorji



Photo courtesy of Dr. George Cuesta

“The first mental health volunteer, Dr. Ain, a psychiatrist from New York, arrived in the summer of 2010. Since then, nearly 50 volunteers have visited Bhutan, marking a milestone in our mental health development journey.”

In the early 2000s, Bhutan and HVO established a partnership that brought health volunteers in physiotherapy and orthopedics to Bhutan. Having become Bhutan’s first trained psychiatrist in 1999, it was natural for me to seek additional professional support in mental health from abroad. I approached HVO to request mental health volunteers soon after I began work, but at that time, HVO declined, explaining that they did not yet have a program in mental health.

In 2007, I was awarded the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship in Drug Use Treatment, Prevention, and Education, which placed me at Johns Hopkins University. During my fellowship, I followed up with HVO’s program director to renew my request. Although she was initially uncertain about mobilizing enough mental health professionals, I organized a professional event in the Washington, D.C. area attended by around 200 mental health practitioners and HVO’s director. The event convinced her that HVO could indeed recruit sufficient volunteers for Bhutan.

Upon my return to Bhutan in 2008, I approached the Ministry of Health with a proposal to introduce HVO mental health volunteers. As HVO was already sending physiotherapists and orthopedic specialists, the Ministry readily agreed. Together, we established the terms and conditions for the program. We set broad criteria for volunteers - psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and social workers - from English-speaking countries. Volunteers were required to have at least three years of experience and an aptitude for working in low-resource settings.

Dr. Charles Thompson, a psychiatrist in Seattle, who visited Bhutan as a tourist and met me, became HVO’s first project director. The first mental health volunteer, Dr. Ain, a psychiatrist from New York, arrived in the summer of 2010. Since then, nearly 50 volunteers have visited Bhutan, marking a milestone in our mental health development journey.

Our initial goal was to introduce the concept of a multidisciplinary mental health team to Bhutan - demonstrating that psychiatric services cannot be provided by a lone psychiatrist but require collaboration among psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric nurses, social workers and general health workers. We achieved this goal early on. The direct beneficiaries were our health workers, who, for the first time, experienced multidisciplinary teamwork in mental health care.

The broader goal - consistent with HVO’s mission - was to build Bhutan’s mental health human resource capacity. I began alone, running outpatient services while training primary care providers in basic mental health. Gradually, local capacity grew: a Bhutanese mental health nurse returned from training in India, followed by two more, leading to the establishment of our first psychiatric inpatient ward in 2004.

From the Desk of Dr. Chencho Dorji

By 2010, with another Bhutanese psychiatrist trained and a 10-bed psychiatric ward operational at the national referral hospital in Thimphu, HVO volunteers began working alongside us.

Initially, volunteers engaged in informal training and shared their expertise through patient consultations and workshops. Later, they participated in formal training programs, especially after the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan introduced degree programs in clinical counseling, medicine, and psychiatry.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Chencho Dorji

The program's greatest success has been the introduction of qualified, multidisciplinary mental health professionals into Bhutan's health system. This inspired and supported our efforts to develop a comprehensive national mental health program.

Beyond their clinical and educational roles, volunteers contributed specialized therapeutic knowledge and skills, introducing techniques such as Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT), EMDR, acupuncture, sand therapy, mindfulness, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and environmental/spiritual therapies.

Dr. Norman James, a psychiatrist volunteer from Australia, introduced ECT to Bhutan in 2012, even bringing refurbished ECT machines with him. He was later nominated for the HVO Golden Apple Award in 2012, which he won! Other volunteers contributed to developing and reviewing curricula for counseling and psychiatric training programs, supervising research, co-authoring publications, and supporting participation in international conferences.

Our partnership thrived for over a decade, mutually benefiting both volunteers and Bhutanese professionals. HVO volunteers covered their travel and living expenses, while the Bhutanese government provided gratis visas, basic accommodation, and local transport.

HVO volunteers demonstrated the caliber and diversity of mental health professionals who together form a comprehensive mental health service team. They have helped strengthen Bhutan's mental health human resource base and improve the quality of care and training nationwide.

Bhutan remains a highly attractive destination for Western professionals, with its pristine Himalayan environment, rich cultural heritage, and guiding philosophy of Gross National Happiness. The King's recent vision of developing a "Mindfulness City" has added further interest.

Our HVO volunteers often describe their stay as professionally rewarding and personally transformative - enriched by Bhutanese hospitality and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to a developing health system.

It is truly a mutually beneficial partnership, and we deeply appreciate HVO's role in facilitating this long-standing collaboration.

Second Annual Oncology Essentials Workshop

In Nepal, a severe shortage of oncologists limits access to life-saving cancer care. There is roughly one medical oncologist for every 750,000 people, compared to one for every 18,750 in the United States. Dr. Soniya Dulal, a medical oncologist at B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences (BPKIHS) and an HVO on-site coordinator, is working hard to change this. With support from Dr. Melanie Thomas, HVO project director, Dr. Dulal was successful in establishing a new oncology residency track at her hospital. While this was a huge step, it still did not feel like enough. In the fall of 2024, Dr. Dulal and Dr. Thomas organized the first Oncology Essentials workshop at BPKIHS for thirty-four internal medicine residents from around the country to learn the basics of triaging and treating oncology patients. The workshop was such a success that they held a second one in the fall of 2025, reaching even more providers:

- 40 internal medicine residents representing all 34 medical colleges in Nepal
- 14 general practitioners, one from each of the districts in Dharan's province
- 10 community health care workers from nearby districts
- 6 oncology nurses from BPKIHS
- Faculty, administrators of regional policymakers
- 20 members of the BPKIHS Students Oncology Wing

To learn more about Nepal's growing cancer care needs and how this team is bridging the gap, scan the QR code to watch a short documentary.



“I’m on a high I hope to never come down from. There was really good engagement from all the participants, some wonderful interactive sessions where we could tell they had all learned. There is much enthusiasm and hope for growing oncology in eastern Nepal, and HVO is right at the center of it!”

- Melanie Thomas, MD, project director, oncology, Nepal



Photo courtesy of Samson Productions

Feinberg Fellowship Opportunity in Malawi – Speech-Language Pathology

HVO is recruiting a long-term volunteer for a full-time lecturer position with Kamuzu University of Health Sciences to provide oversight and guidance to their new speech-language pathology (SLP) bachelor's program.

Qualifications:

- Master's degree in a relevant field
- 3 years' relevant work experience
- Current SLP license required - retired SLP with a current license may apply

Ideal candidates would:

- Live in Blantyre for a minimum of one year
- Hold a CSD or AuD certification
- Have previous academic experience as a faculty member and researcher
- Be committed to interprofessional education and practice

Responsibilities include:

- Participating in the development and review of curriculum
- Developing and reviewing teaching and learning materials
- Providing effective teaching, assessment and supervision to students at various levels
- Initiating and undertaking research projects, consultancies and outreach activities
- Developing, adopting, and adapting various new technologies and concepts
- Participating in developing and implementing resource mobilization strategies
- Mentoring assistant lectures
- Representing the Department in various fora
- Supporting faculty with research
- Preparing and submitting reports

The minimum placement duration is one year. The projected start date for this position is 2027. The Feinberg Fellowship covers airfare, housing, and a small stipend. Short-term volunteer opportunities with this project are also available, though not funded. We encourage volunteers to reach out if a short-term placement is of interest. Please contact Program Coordinator Emily Dalton at e.dalton@hvousa.org.



Photo courtesy of Amy Sacco



Photo courtesy of Amy Sacco

Building a Safer Future at Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital

Hospitals are meant to be safe havens for those seeking care. Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital (SKMH) in Kampot, Cambodia, is working to strengthen both clinical care and patient safety as it pursues national accreditation. In early 2026, HVO volunteers Dr. Connie Evashwick and Ms. Virpi Teinila assembled a team from San Diego State University to partner with hospital leaders on environmental safety and security - an accreditation standard focused on disaster preparedness and patient safety and security.



Photo courtesy of
Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital

During their two weeks on site, the team trained staff at every level, from administrators to maintenance personnel. One of the highest impact activities was a full-scale fire drill, during which more than 140 staff members participated in evacuation exercises and fire safety training. “We reached more than half of the hospital’s staff,” said Dr. Evashwick. Ms. Teinila recalled feeling emotional seeing the entire hospital community gathered safely outside after the drill.

Beyond the fire drill, the team provided disaster management training to senior administrators and department heads, taught staff how to use fire extinguishers and safely evacuate patients, and reviewed emergency scenarios ranging from gas explosions to flash floods. They also identified practical, low-cost improvements, such as installing a battery-operated alarm system, which could significantly strengthen hospital safety.

The volunteers are now preparing documentation to support SKMH’s accreditation under the Cambodian Hospital Association standards. “They had never completed this paperwork before,” said Dr. Evashwick. “We’ve helped show them what needs to be done, but there is more work ahead.”

Mr. Sou Kin, Chief Administration Officer at SKMH, shared that the trainings strengthened the hospital’s preparedness plans and increased staff confidence. “The HVO team helped strengthen our Disaster Management Plan. Their guidance helped ensure our procedures are clear and effective. Staff are now more confident and better prepared for facility-wide and community disasters. Procedures are clearer, and overall hospital safety has improved,” he said.

This project represents a new and growing area of engagement for HVO. We look forward to continuing our partnership with SKMH to help ensure a safer environment for patients, families, visitors, staff, and HVO volunteers.

To read the full story, scan the QR code or visit hvousa.org/blog/building-a-safer-future-skmh.



Photos courtesy of Sonja Kill Memorial Hospital and Dr. Connie Evashwick

Special Thanks

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A planned gift ensures that HVO will be able to continue to make important educational strides in the improvement of health care in resource-scarce countries.

When you write or review your will, please consider leaving HVO a charitable bequest as an investment in HVO's future. To discuss making a bequest in your will or other charitable aspects of your estate planning, please contact Danielle Stonehirsch at d.stonehirsch@hvousa.org.

If you have already made a charitable bequest, please let us know. We would like the opportunity to express our gratitude and will honor all requests to remain anonymous.

Thank you to the following people who have made this commitment:

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Photo courtesy of
 Dr. Margaret Fitch

Health Volunteers Overseas is dedicated to improving the availability and quality of health care through the education, training and professional development of the health workforce in resource-scarce countries. HVO designs and implements clinical training and education programs in child health, primary care, trauma and rehabilitation, essential surgical care, oral health, blood disorders and cancer, infectious disease, wound management, and nursing education.

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