

‘Condom Tunnel’ Creates Corridor of Knowledge

Interventions geared toward sex workers and their clients raise awareness in a high-risk area of Vietnam’s Mekong Delta

By George W. Russell

National Highway 80 is a dusty two-lane road deep in southern Vietnam’s Mekong Delta. Overloaded trucks rumble along on their way from Ho Chi Minh City to Cambodia in the west and the South China Sea ports to the east. The broad Cai San canal runs parallel to the road, and boats loaded with grain, fuel and produce travel a similar route.

The highway starts in the northeast corner of Can Tho province, in a tumbledown district of thatched cottages and small concrete homes called Thot Not. Most of the inhabitants of Thot Not work in rice fields or agricultural processing plants. Some supplement their income by selling roadside food or firewood. Others, attuned to the habits of the district’s visiting truckers, migrant workers and mariners, operate makeshift brothels along the strip of Highway 80 in front of the canal. These are often little more than huts with thin straw mats, but they meet demand.

The strip has existed for decades, predating the Vietnam War and surviving the takeover by the Communist north in 1975. Now, thanks to Family Health International (FHI), it has undergone some redecorating. Along a three-mile (five-kilometer) stretch, there are signs urging safe sex and responsible behavior: *Condoms are wonderful. They help prevent AIDS. And give us peace of mind. Shall we use my dear?* Some signs have a more lyrical bent: *Honey, remember my words as you are traveling. To prevent AIDS, a condom you should always be using. Welcome to Vietnam’s “Condom Tunnel.”*

Not everyone on Highway 80 is in the sex trade, so some view the signs with embarrassment, or at least bemusement. “It says we should use condoms for planning,” whispers Nguyen Quoc Vu, a 13-year-old boy in Vinh Trinh hamlet, taken off-guard by questions about the new signposts. “What else it says, I really should not say,” he adds, addressing not the questioner but the folds of his grandmother’s dress. Others are more forthright. “I am pleased to see the sign,” says a 20-something mother nursing her baby 500 meters up the road,



Photo: Tran Hoa

“Shall We Use My Dear?”

An FHI-sponsored billboard along Vietnam’s National Highway 80 urges passersby to use condoms. The highway, now known to many as the “condom tunnel,” is a key transportation corridor in the southern part of the country. “The condom tunnel is having a major impact, not only on the highway but over a broader area,” says Thomas Kane, FHI’s Country Director for Vietnam.

where the highway briefly slips through Chau Thanh hamlet, a corner of neighboring An Giang province. “It tells us to use condoms. We use them already,” she says, proudly showing her adherence to the state-mandated two-child limit.

The message is seemingly clear: Use condoms. But as in many other parts of the world, it’s a message not easily understood. Working closely with the National AIDS Standing Bureau and provincial AIDS authorities, FHI aims to use public awareness messages to reduce the risk of HIV among vulnerable populations here. “The condom tunnel is having a major impact, not only on the highway but over a broader area,” says Thomas Kane, PhD, FHI’s country director in Vietnam.

Can Tho’s central location – it borders six other provinces – and its relatively efficient transportation links help explain the area’s incidence of HIV/AIDS. As of January 31, 2001 Can Tho ranked 11th among Vietnam’s 61 provinces and province-level cities in reported HIV-positive persons, with 668. It ranks fourth in reported AIDS cases (254) and ranks ninth in reported AIDS deaths (65). Although nationally almost two-thirds of all reported HIV infections are among

intravenous drug users, Can Tho provincial authorities say the majority of patients contract the disease via unsafe sexual activity, resulting in HIV transmission from husbands to wives and children. More than 90 percent of the patients are between 15 and 39 years old, although one is 70. HIV has infected 26 children in the province via mother-to-child transmission.¹

The first report of HIV in Vietnam occurred in December 1990 in Ho Chi Minh City. As of October 1, 2001, the official number of HIV-positive people in Vietnam is 39,845, including 5,955 who have developed full-blown AIDS and 3,247 who have died. But those are the reported figures. “The actual numbers are at least five to seven times greater than the reported numbers,” says Dr. Kane. Current estimates of persons living with HIV/AIDS in Vietnam are between 130,000 and 200,000. By the end of 2005, Vietnam projects it will be home to about 200,000 people living with HIV, 50,000 of whom will have AIDS. More than 45,000 people will have died from the disease, according to estimates by the National Committee on AIDS Prevention, Drug and Prostitution Control.²

In response to the growing problem, Dr. Kane says FHI is mounting a comprehensive media and education campaign. Educational efforts are directed at workers in both public- and private-sector factories; health professionals, including physicians and pharmacists; commercial sex workers (CSWs) and their clients; and intravenous drug users.

Among the first efforts was the social marketing of condoms, both in traditional outlets, such as pharmacies, and non-traditional outlets, such as restaurants and convenience stores. FHI funds the marketing of condoms in six provinces, including Can Tho. “They used to hate condoms here. They totally avoided them,” says Trinh Thi Thuy Lien, who’s finishing her term as communications manager at the Hanoi office of condom social marketer DKT International to become a Fulbright fellow. Now, DKT sells 35 million to 45 million condoms each year in Vietnam, a country of about 78 million people. Sales are subsidized so the condoms can be sold at an affordable 200 dong (about 1.4 U.S. cents) each. Retailers mark them up to 1,000-2,000 dong (7-14 U.S. cents) for a pack of three.

Since awareness programs began a few years ago, use of condoms by men having sex with commercial sex workers has risen dramatically, Ms. Lien says. A recent behavioral surveillance survey in Can Tho, conducted with financial and technical assistance from FHI, bears out Ms. Lien’s observations. Thirty-nine percent of truck drivers and nine percent of migrant workers had sex with CSWs within the previous 12 months; of those, 94 percent and 78 percent, respectively, used a condom the last time they engaged in commercial sex. Karaoke bar-based CSWs in Can Tho report condoms being used in 96 percent of their encounters, while street-based CSWs with non-regular clients report using them 95 percent of the time. Those figures fall to 94 percent and 80 percent for regular clients, respectively. Condom use drops significantly for sex with non-paying partners, to 76 percent for karaoke bar-based CSWs and a low 25 percent for street-based CSWs.

Another positive effect of the campaign is the growing acceptance of condom purchase among men. “We would like to see condoms become a normally traded commodity, with competition over quality and price,” says Le Van Long, deputy director of Thot Not’s district health center.

Indeed, some people are already profiting from rising condom sales. Truong Van Thai is regarded as a local “Mr. Big” in Chau Thanh, the An Giang hamlet. Officially, he’s in the retail soft-drinks trade, but residents say he is involved in a variety of businesses along Highway 80. Mr. Thai’s position in the community is buttressed by his manner of greeting visitors. Reclining on a cushion-covered pallet in one of his outlets, surrounded by burly associates, Mr. Thai apologizes for not getting up, saying he has a bout of hypertension. In two years, he said, condom sales have come to account for more than half of his revenues, from

¹Can Tho Provincial Health Department figures, reported in *Van Hoa* (Culture), April 11, 2001.

²National Committee on AIDS Prevention, Drug and Prostitution Control: *Orientations in the HIV/AIDS Program 2001-2005, Hanoi: March 2001-12-06, page 3.*



virtually nothing before. Mr. Thai said he began stocking condoms because he wanted to help local health programs, but he quickly “found that they’re a good source of income.” Normally his customers come for tea and soda, but he says new customers will always be offered condoms at a bargain price.

Can Tho city, the capital and home to about 400,000 people, is ideally situated midway between Cambodia and the South China Sea, right on the north-south National Highway 1. Four hours by highway and ferry from Saigon, the city is a springboard for tours of the Mekong Delta, and several downtown hotels and restaurants cater to the expanding tourist market. A French group plans to build a Western-style supermarket in the capital and provincial leaders hope their economic future lies in the nascent, but so far stalled, software industry.

But it’s not all good news: Until ways are found to overcome Mekong’s constant silting, plans to turn Can Tho into a major Southeast Asian seaport will remain unrealized. In the meantime, the area will stay centered on agriculture. Farm workers live in thatched cottages clustered between paddies and highways, and the province is a temporary home for thousands of itinerant rice millers and fruit pickers and packers. Getting the HIV/AIDS prevention message across to them is one of FHI’s prime goals.

Lunchtime brings a pause to the din that normally dominates Hiep Thanh Trading Co., a leading rice miller in Thot Not. Sacks of rice are wheeled out of the factory and loaded onto boats at the plant’s canal-side back entrance. At a local lunch spot across from the factory entrance, Nguyen Van Hoang, head of the company’s HIV/AIDS peer educator group, uses a wooden phallus to demonstrate the correct way to put a condom on. (Someone has recently added a smiley face to the model’s head). He silences guffaws with a look and rattles off the topics of his lectures: “What is HIV/AIDS, how deadly is it, how to use condoms properly, how HIV is transmitted, how to prevent it.” Despite his candor, Mr. Hoang says the workers don’t discuss their commercial sex exploits. “Sometimes at the end of the day, people will come to me and ask for condoms. If they don’t want to do that, they can buy them at a shop across the street,” he says.

The focus of the men’s prevention campaign is to help men take more responsibility for safe sex. Fortunately, there are people, like Mr. Hoang, to carry that message. And people like Dong Quang Buu, a pillar of the community in Thoi Thuan, the start of Highway 80. The 45-year-old Mr. Buu, who fought in the war against the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, is secretary of the local veterans’ association and a member of the local night security detail. Mr. Buu drives a *xe om*, a motorcycle taxi common throughout Vietnam. He’s also part of a 15-member group along the Condom Tunnel that promotes awareness. Armed with pamphlets and condoms, he spreads the word. “Every two days, I’ll be asked by a passenger: ‘Take me to a woman,’” he says with a sigh. Mr. Buu will ask about the man’s family situation and then explain condom use. “I’m very socially aware,” he shrugs. “Men here are very playful – I know there’s a problem.”

Indeed, the lure of sex is never far away in Can Tho city. The main streets of the city are burgeoning with new coffee shops, bars and karaoke parlors. Groups of young girls giggle and stare at strangers. On darker streets, visitors can expect a hand on the arm and gentle cajoling into a dimly lit bar. Can Tho is a city with a reputation. “Young men say they’re going to Can Tho, and everyone laughs,” says DKT’s Ms. Lien. “Poems have been written about the ‘pretty girls of Can Tho.’ And tourists, particularly domestic tourists, know about the thriving sex industry here.” On the strength of that reputation, some teenage girls from Can Tho have traveled as far as Hai Phong, in northern Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to work as prostitutes.

Most forms of commercial sex are available in Can Tho. The most expensive are the hostess bars that line major streets. Many are in the guise of coffee shops, but some don’t even bother to sell food or alcohol. Others are more open about their business – they have women on display in the front and motel-type rooms for sex transactions in the back. Less expensive are the mobile sex workers on motorbikes, either two CSWs or one and her pimp. The street workers are the least expensive, although bargain-hunters can find CSWs who will make the transactions in woods or open fields.



Photo: Tran Hoa

An HIV/AIDS peer educator at Hiep Thanh Trading Co. demonstrates proper condom use for onlooking workers.

There is a definite pecking order, according to one street CSW named Tam. “Girls have to leave the bars when they get too old, and (must then) go on the street,” she says. Even socially, the two types keep apart. “I know only a few bar girls,” she says. Some street workers pay commissions – up to 33 percent – to taxi and motorcycle drivers who find them clients.

Until recently, prostitutes caught by frequent police raids found themselves locked in the formidable state-run re-education camps. “It was totally useless,” says Linh, a Can Tho city street CSW who has spent several terms in the camps. The camps, she says, offer a predictable routine of classroom work, physical education and outdoor labor, as well as vocational guidance (such as sewing and cooking classes) that is usually ineffective.

A new approach was needed, so with technical and financial assistance from FHI, what might be a unique institution in Vietnam was established: the Can Tho Women’s Health Club. In a bright airy building in Can Tho’s centrally located Huu Phuoc Park, more than 40 female CSWs gather. Disco music blares from a stereo system as they swap information, gossip and the latest fashion, dance and make-up tips. More importantly, they can also get counseling, condoms and HIV education from health educators, and a visiting physician examines them for STDs and other conditions. “This is a major achievement to legitimize the fact that sex workers have needs,” says Dr. Kane. “I am impressed by the flexibility the authorities have shown. They have begun to humanize (CSWs) instead of treating them solely as vectors of disease.”

Chi, a 37-year-old veteran of the sex trade, says she never used condoms before she came to the center. “I learned about them here,” she explains. Chi visits the center every day, mainly to catch up with friends. Showers and some meals are provided (paid for by voluntary contributions from club members), as are lessons in health, cooking, make-up, dancing, and gymnastics. Since it opened in September 2000, more than 560 CSWs have joined.

Health educators make the rounds of Can Tho’s hot spots, trying to convince CSWs to visit the center. One of them, Co, is a former garment worker. Now she leads an outreach program from the center. “I try to bring as many women as I can to the center,” she says. “The ones here are aged between 17 and 56. Some arrive with pimps and bodyguards. It’s a very complicated situation.” Co breaks off to talk to a new arrival. A young woman has stumbled into the center sobbing. Co comforts her for an hour or more, listening to her story. “Some just need people to talk to.”

Hoa, a 24-year-old CSW, was impressed on her first visit. “Vui,” she cried, using the generic Vietnamese term for something good, fun or cool. Hoa says she already used condoms – she had been urged to by more experienced women at the sex parlor where she worked. “I want to bring my friends here so they will learn,” she says. CSWs say they don’t discuss among themselves who uses a condom and who doesn’t.



Photo: Tran Hoa

Can Tho Women’s Health Club, Can Tho, Vietnam.

Two mornings a week, the center’s clinic is open for business. It’s just a small room with a desk and examination table off the noisy main floor, but a steady stream of women awaits the doctor. Nguyen Thanh Ha, the consultant today, shakes her head as she lists the problems of the day. “Discharges, menstrual problems, improper condom use. One girl had a condom stuck inside her body for weeks.” Funding is tight – Dr. Ha says she frequently pays for medicines out of her own pocket – and the women are surprisingly unaware of the health risks. “The knowledge level is extremely low,” she says. “The understanding of risk is poor and there’s a poor concept of health. Many women have smelly, itchy long-term infections and do nothing.” Slowly, she adds, the message is getting through. Fewer patients have a recurrence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), she says.

STD infections lower resistance to HIV and often enable transmission through sores and broken skin. To combat the problem, FHI is providing instruction in STD diagnosis and treatment to 450 of Can Tho’s private physicians and pharmacists, who form the backbone of STD services for men in Vietnam. Pharmacists say they treat 80 percent to 90 percent of all STD cases in the province. FHI tries to provide them with a systematic approach to diagnosis, so they will prescribe the right drugs. Pharmacists and drugstore owners are urged to promote condom use.

In Vietnam, pharmacists walk a fine line. Legally, they are permitted only to prescribe drugs, not diagnose and treat, but many flout the rules because of high demand, poor customers and the dearth of public health services. “There’s a difference between reality and the law,” observes Vo Van Ba, a pharmacist in Ngoc Thanh who attended an FHI-funded training course at nearby Vi Thanh District Hospital.



Boat on the Mekong River, Can Tho, Vietnam.

Photo: Tran Hoa

Indeed, legal and political obstacles still hamper efforts to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS, health officials say. “Some leaders and policy makers do not agree with or do not understand our approach. Some think we are promoting ‘social evils,’” observes Lai Kim Anh, secretary of the provincial AIDS committee. Nevertheless, with help from institutions such as FHI, public awareness campaigns have moved from lecturing and threatening to attractive and informative. “We’re seeing a move away from the ‘anti social evils’ agenda and toward a public health approach,” says Dr. Kane. “We have a message that’s not going to turn people off.”



George W. Russell is a writer and editor based in Hanoi who has worked on HIV/AIDS programs in Indonesia and has previously written about HIV/AIDS for *The Asian Wall Street Journal*.

Design and layout by FHI Senior Editor Rob Ritzenthaler.