Tham describes the difficulties of being unable to see. Since she traveled to the school alone, she must make the trek back home before dark.
The villagers sit in small plastic chairs as they watch Project Vietnam volunteers set up a medical clinic at the Thruong Th-c Thanh Mai school in Northern rural Vietnam. Adults and children fill in the chairs and clutch their medical record forms as they wait their turn for treatment. Among them is Ng Thi Tham, an 86-year-old resident of Bac Kan, who lives three kilometers from the school. She is one of the many who hiked and rode motorbikes through Bac Kan's mountainous terrain, making long treks in order to see the American doctors, optometrists, dentists and pharmacists of Project Vietnam. The non-profit organization assembles medical missions throughout the year to visit impoverished villages in Vietnam where medical aid is not readily available. To visit doctors, villagers are directed to nearby schools and sub par medical centers that have been fashioned into Westernized clinics where they will make their way through four stations: vitals, physical assessment, pharmacy and optometry.

With her left, calloused hand resting on her chin, Tham stares off into the distance, her pale brown eyes peek out of a face filled with wrinkles so deep that they resemble the crevices prevalent throughout the mountainous areas of Bac Kan. Surrounded by a courtyard composed of four crème colored buildings, she sits with a permanently arched back that is concealed by a heavy, deep purple sweater, one that fits one size too large and further exaggerates her tiny frame. Her hair is styled into a bun and is secured with a black headband; though wisps of her salt and pepper grey hair escape to create subtle bangs that frame her face.

She snaps out of her contemplative state momentarily to pick off crusts of dirt sandwiched between her fingernails. Her skin is as rough as sandpaper and etched with fine lines that reveal a body that looks closer to the age of 100 rather than 86. She is dressed in her best outfit and aims to present herself to the doctors by looking as clean as possible.

“I have not seen a doctor for 30 years,” said Tham, who has lived in Bac Kan her whole life. “I have many problems: I can’t sleep, I can’t eat and I can’t see well… I want to get help.”

The weight in at 42 kilograms with a height of 146 centimeters, Tham’s frail body barely allows her to make the three kilometer journey to the school.
I have not seen a doctor for 30 years, I have many problems: I can’t sleep, I can’t eat and I can’t see well... I want to get help.

Ng Thi Tham
PVNF Patient

I can’t sleep, I can’t eat and I can’t see well... I want to get help.

Ng Thi Tham gets her vitals are checked, the nurse immediately says that Tham is underfed and malnourished.

Tham has severe cataracts in both eyes that can only be corrected through surgery. The doctor said she cannot have glasses.

Tham makes, showing her toothy, yellow teeth as she reminiscence her treatment at the optometrist room. She could visit a doctor to perform the surgery, she shrugs off his suggestion. Since Tham lives alone, she believes that getting surgery would be problematic because she would need help during the recuperation stage post-operation. All she wanted was a pair of glasses that would help improve her vision, even if they did so marginally.

"Surgery and operations are something that I don’t want to pay money about," said Tham, who then brought up how she missed her family.

"It’s been five to six years since Tham has seen her son or daughter-in-law. She makes everyday that they could visit, but they are poor and that they are incapable of setting aside time and money to visit her. As Tham reminisce about her last encounter with her son, she begins to cry. With tears filling and flowing down the cracks of her cheeks, she says that she wants to see her son or daughter-in-law more often."

Tham's situation is characteristic to those who live in Northern and Southern rural area of Vietnam. "Due to the lack of medical treatment, conditions that can’t treated immediately can lead to serious long-time health problems. Tham, with the bureaucratic health process regulated by the government, knows many individual to make what seem like pilgrimages to visit medical centers or, like Tham, forgo seeing a doctor at all."

When a volunteer calls Tham's name, she rises slowly from her seat and takes small steps to reach the vital station, which is housed in one of the two abandoned classrooms that inhabits each building. Making her way towards the volunteer's desk she reach and sitting nearest corner neatly on a green chalkboard, Tham sits with a tired and still body. The volunteer begins checking her vitals immediately, the nurse taking her vitals immediately says that Tham is underfed and malnourished. Her body is so rail thin and weak that the nurse is having hard in order to move from vitals to the physical examination section.

"Her vision is extremely poor," said Nguyen, "As she is underfed and malnourished, her body is so rail thin and weak. The little money that Tham receives is used to purchase medication, mostly roots, so I don’t know what they use to cure their illnesses, but they must be miracle products."

"I feel pity for myself," Tham said as she clutches her chest. "I have to beg just to get clothes. I am poor and Tham is too busy taking care of her family. She tends her own farm and earned enough money to take care of her family. When her son becomes as adult, he moved in with his wife and start to purchase medicine unofficially, from people who sell herbs, and drugs of the ancient and modern era."

"It’s cheaper than going to a doctor," Tham said, while trying walking to her cozy. "I’d like to get help from Nguyen."

Nguyen finishes off Tham's physical by checking her teeth and his familiar with his microscope. He reaches the diagnosis that she is acuton and require prescription眼里 glasses and medicine for her. Though, his examination is partly inconclusive.

"Some people also have knitted hair off the land, it’s hard to figure out what they use to care their hair," said Nguyen. "She has been using unusual herbal medication, mostly trees, so I don’t know what he use it and whether it’s causing her lack of sleep and body pain.

After giving two bags from the pharmacy, one containing 50 pills of antibiotics for her pain and the other containing 30 multivitamin pills, Tham goes to the gift station and receive a small plastic energy bag filled with an assortment of dry and canned food."

"I thank God that I’m fortunate enough to be alive and that I’m able to visit doctors close by," Tham said, while walking toward the school entrance. "I thank God that the bureaucratic health process regulated by the government, knows many individual to make what seem like pilgrimages to visit medical centers or, like Tham, forgo seeing a doctor at all."

Since many individuals wait so long to seek immediate treatment, conditions that can’t treated immediately can lead to serious long-time health problems. Tham, with the bureaucratic health process regulated by the government, knows many individual to make what seem like pilgrimages to visit medical centers or, like Tham, forgo seeing a doctor at all. Tham makes, showing her toothy, yellow teeth as she reminiscence her treatment at the optometrist room. She could visit a doctor to perform the surgery, she shrugs off his suggestion. Since Tham lives alone, she believes that getting surgery would be problematic because she would need help during the recuperation stage post-operation. All she wanted was a pair of glasses that would help improve her vision, even if they did so marginally.

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