



Australia Awards

# Chhim Sotheara

## Australia Awards supporting mental health



Dr Chhim Sotheara gained an Australia Awards scholarship on two occasions – first in 1999, when he completed his Master’s in Psychological Medicine at the University of New South Wales, and again in 2008, when his Australia Leadership Award allowed him to complete his Doctoral Studies at Monash University in Victoria.

As Executive Director of the NGO, Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation, Dr Chhim is based in Phnom Penh, but often works in other parts of Cambodia.

“The Organisation provides psychological and mental care to Cambodian people at grass root levels, especially those who have been traumatised by the Khmer Rouge, and those who suffer mental health problems due to the lack of social support and poverty. “We create programs that help people to help themselves - and to be able to function within their family, their communities and their society”, Dr Chhim said.

From his childhood, Dr Chhim always wanted to follow in his family’s footsteps, and become an architect or a civil engineer.

“I wanted to build skyscrapers in Phnom Penh like in New York, but the Khmer Rouge changed my dreams because only about 40 doctors survived in the whole country, out of 400 doctors at that time.”

“My mother said to me that I must study medicine, so at least I could always help the family, so I agreed with her, and when I finished high school in 1986, I enrolled in Medical School.”

After graduating as a doctor in 1992, Dr Chhim worked as a surgeon.

“However, there were some people who come to the hospital with obvious mental problems but I had never studied psychiatry at medical school because there was no professor available. I then started to question what psychiatry was all about and in 1994, I enrolled in a program run by Oslo University and became one of the first group of 10 psychiatrists to be trained in Cambodia.

In 2002, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation was looking for a Director, so Dr Chhim felt the role would align with his desires and interests, applied, and was selected to join the organisation.

“This is a community mental health organisation and so we provide our services *in the community*; I feel that I can see and help more people this way than by sitting in a clinic.”

Dr Chhim stays in touch with his colleagues and lecturers in Australia, regularly using Skype to discuss and consult on patients highlighting the enduring professional links and cross-cultural personal ties that are created through the Australia Awards.

“It’s good to have people we know and people who are qualified that can support us. My Australia Award not only helped me while studying, but also from the networks I use after returning to Cambodia.”

Today, Dr Chhim works with those in need in the local community, as well as dealing with mental health issues on a national scale through his work on the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. In 2012, Dr Chhim received the Leitner Center’s (New York) Annual Human Rights Award for his extraordinary work in helping to heal his nation from the terrible atrocities of the past.

