

FROM THE HEART

Ambulance service fills dire gap in Yangon's health service

Tara Lee

The ambulance kicks up the dust from the unpaved dirt road. The medic looks at his watch nervously, tugs the plastic gloves off his hands and reaches for the walkie-talkie. They are on route to hospital with an injured man and time is of the essence.

Myanmar's emergency response was non-existent until recently. One of the earliest efforts to provide training was undertaken by Australian Volunteers International (AVI) in 2012, during which the Myanmar Emergency Medicine Introductory Course was presented. According to ReliefWeb, powered by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), it wasn't until 2015 that Myanmar introduced its first-ever emergency ambulance services.

Only three to five percent of emergency admissions to hospital have access to ambulance services in Myanmar. To tackle this dire situation, several volunteer medical organisations have sprung up. Noble Heart is one such service for Yangon citizens.

The beginning

Shwe Kyar started Noble Heart patient transport service in January, 2015. Originally from Shan State,

she left home 20 years ago to relocate in Yangon, where she worked in the jewellery business. Two critical events in 2014 inspired her to start Noble Heart, she said. Her father fell ill. She went back to Shan to visit, during which he passed away from lung cancer. Shortly after, she herself contracted dengue fever and was in and out of the hospital for nearly a month.

"I had to have eight bags of plasma transferred over nine days. Then I returned home to recuperate, but had to return to the hospital once again," she told Mizzima Weekly.

"During that time I grew close with other patients in the hospital. I saw the dire circumstance they are in. They are poverty-stricken, without food, fighting disease in unbearable heat. I saw hope disappear from people," she said. After she returned to good health, she started to donate food. Nearly every morning, when dawn breaks, she is at the Yangon General Hospital, bringing rice soup to hungry patients.

In addition to seeing the patients and their family fed, she went on further, volunteering to transport patients living in the larger Yangon area across the river and into the city centre. In 2015, she opened Noble Heart with less than 10 staff members. Currently about 100 people



Shwe Kyar poses with one of her ambulances and some of her team members. Photos: Hong Sar/Mizzima



work in her NGO, with 30 staff on call daily from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm. All staff receive rescue and first-aid training up to an international standard, and she herself received training from a Swiss expert helping on the Thailand-Myanmar border.

Keeping busy

Noble Heart transports up to 18 patients on busy days and at least four to five per day, she said. Buildings in Myanmar are not always equipped with elevators, and private vehicles are a luxury, which makes their service crucial. The only official emergency transport services are offered by the government and the Red Cross, both of which are constrained by budget and hence their activities as well.

Noble Heart and about six other local NGOs often offer speedier service with higher quality medical support.

Secondly, hospitals will charge patients for transport to and from home, whereas Noble Heart is completely free of charge.

“We receive zero payment. Staff are not allowed to accept even a drink or a snack the families of patients might offer, to prevent any possibility of corruption,” she emphasized.

A non-profit organisation, Noble Heart operates solely on donations. As the NGO has become more and more well-known, more donations have been coming in, she said. It owes its publicity to Facebook, where its page has accumulated over a thousand ‘Likes,’ as well as leaflets the staff hands out and stickers put up in hospitals for patients to take notice.

Additionally, the number of volunteers has also increased dramatically. Students and middle-aged adults come from all walks of life to give a helping hand, even if they can come only on their days off.

Ko Si Thu, 32, has worked for Noble Heart since the beginning of the year. “I want to serve and feel grateful. Do something good,” he said as he added his belief in the Karmic reward and retribution in Buddhism. Nearly ten people have quit their

full-time jobs to join Noble Heart, clearly a notable decision given the work involved.

Against the clock

The notorious Yangon traffic makes for an adrenaline pinching race against the clock, especially when patients are in grave condition and need to be transported with haste. On one occasion, Shwe Kyar was accompanying a pregnant woman, about to give birth. After ferrying her across the Yangon river, she went into labour and Shwe Kyar had to deliver the baby in the ambulance. “I was holding the newborn infant all the way to the hospital,” she reminisced.

The situation has improved since they started cooperating with the traffic control police who will make way for the ambulances, she noted.

Meanwhile, Shwe Kyar also faces discrimination as one of very few women in the sector, traditionally undertaken by men. “When I first started I felt lightheaded at the sight of blood, but now I have been hard-



People arrive to visit a hospital in Yangon. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima



Shwe Kyar outside a hospital. Below, the team help an injured man. Photos: Hong Sar/Mizzima



ened through training and experience,” she said.

Shwe Kyar is the only female staff at Noble Heart. Antiquated superstition dictates that women should not handle patients as it brings bad luck. “The only way to defy that is to show them through action than trying to convince them with talk,” she noted.

Her staff takes after her unflinching attitude. Saw Moe Oo has been working at Noble Heart for over six months. A tour guide, he volunteers full-time during the rainy season when he has fewer customers and on

holidays during high season. “Two years ago there was a car accident where a little girl was run over by a car. There was blood coming out of her ear, possibly from a concussion. From the outskirts of the city we delivered her to the hospital in under 40 minutes. She recuperated and she is well now,” he said.

He added that two months ago, Noble Heart was called to assist at the scene of a fire. “A building downtown caught on fire, there were people everywhere bustling about. Firefighters went inside to rescue

people while we waited downstairs with oxygen masks and first aid support.”

They delivered twelve people to the hospital, all of whom survived.

Having seen the organisation grow exponentially during the past two years, Shwe Kyar aspires to serve more people.

“I don’t look to reward myself. I could not work alone without all the volunteers. Saving people who might not be alive otherwise, seeing patients get better, reflects their hard work and makes me happy,” she said.

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On route to hospital.
Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima