



Sun-Star photo by Roger J. Wyan

Third-year resident doctor Long Thao checks 8-year-old Tuo Xiong for a nosebleed.

Doctor torn between cultures

Third-year resident balancing tradition with modern medicine

By CAMERON COULTER
Staff Writer

Long Thao uses a stethoscope and thermometer to treat Hmong shaman who are more accustomed to animal sacrifices and faith healing.

Thao, 30, is a third-year resident doctor at Merced Community Medical Center.

He said Thursday he has to balance traditional Hmong beliefs with Western medical practices.

"I feel like I'm trapped between two cultures a lot of times. It's a lot of stress," he said.

Hmong traditionally relied on a shaman for healing through prayer, blood-letting and herbal treatment. Thao, 30, believes that belief in the shaman has caused too many problems for the Hmong.

"People know that I am critical of the shaman," he said.

Thao has ample opportunity to discuss the benefits of Western medicine with shamans because he sees some as patients.

"I try to educate my shaman patients that if they have a patient who is sick, they should send him to the doctor," Thao said.

Many Hmong often wait until a sickness has become severe before going to a doctor, he said.

A native of Laos, Thao left his family in the days after the fall of the capital city, Vientiane, in 1975. After a 15-year civil war, the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao communist guerrillas took control of the country.

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After nine months as refugees, his family settled in Illinois.

A graduate of Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Thao next month finishes his residency and plans to work at the West Modesto Clinic.

Not all shaman treatments are bad, he said. Some traditional herbal medications and camphor

balms are just as beneficial as pills for minor illnesses, he said.

He said he uses a traditional white camphor tape on his forehead for relief from headaches.

Among the Hmong, Thao is well-known.

He said he had to get a phone-answering machine and start screening his calls because Hmong from all over the country began to call him in Merced, asking his advice on their problems or for a second opinion after going to another doctor.

"I had to stop that. I didn't want to put myself at risk," he said.

That's hard. The reason why he became a doctor is to help the Hmong people, he said.

"A lot of Hmong people who come here have no way of getting any help. The culture and language are the biggest barriers to their access to health care," he said.

Thao is married and has a 17-month-old son, Jonathan.