

Southeast Asians now have a doctor who understands

Dr. Long Thao, a Hmong refugee in 1976, begins practice

By ALEX PULASKI
McClatchy News Service

Phua Xiong knows how difficult it is to be Hmong and to stand in a doctor's presence, trying to understand English.

So a decade ago, when her son was an undergraduate student at Illinois State University, she encouraged his interest in medicine. The encouragement paid off:

Her son, Dr. Long Thao, finished his residency in Merced in June and is the first Hmong medical doctor to graduate from U.S. schools.

He is one of only three Hmong doctors in the United States.

After finishing his residency at Merced Community Medical Center, he took about a month off. He and his wife still live in Merced but are moving to Modesto, where Thao began practicing Aug. 5.

Thao, 30, is the new medical manager of the West Modesto Medical Clinic.

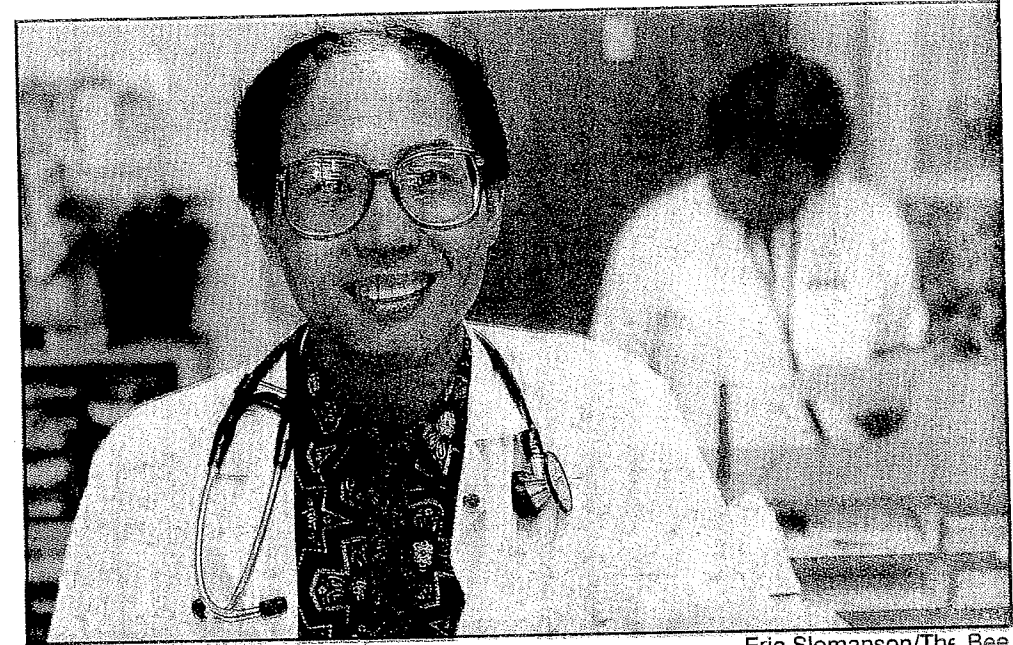
Like nearly all Hmong who have come

to this country since 1975, Thao's journey was spurred by fear. His father, a missionary living in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, had heard that the Vietnam War was ending and that the Hmong, who had supported the United States, would be persecuted by the victorious communists.

Thao said his father told the children that they were going on a little vacation to Thailand. They packed almost nothing and never went back. After several months of living with Thai Buddhist monks and in newly formed refugee camps, the family arrived in Ottawa, Ill., July 23, 1976.

Thao had never spoken a word of English. School began. The kids were reading something called "Romeo and Juliet."

"It was hard," Thao said. "I dressed differently. I did things differently. I got



Eric Slomanson/The Bee

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Dr. Long Thao is nation's first U.S.-educated Hmong medical doctor.

DOCTOR: U.S.-educated former refugee reaches goal

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basically lost most of the time."

He found his compass in a Thai-English dictionary, looking up every new word he heard. He graduated 10th in a class of about 400.

The studying since those early, difficult days has been almost non-stop. Between medical school and his residency, he had one month, and in that month got married.

He chose to spend his residency in Merced because it is home to more than

8,000 Hmong, plus other Southeast Asian refugees. Thao speaks Hmong, Lao, Thai and English fluently, and some French.

But his desire to serve Southeast Asian patients backfired to a great extent. He became a victim of his own popularity, getting calls at all hours from Fresno, Wisconsin or Minnesota — Hmong patients wanting second opinions or legal advice from someone they could trust.

"I think I was abused," he said.

Partially for that reason, he said, he and his wife decided to move to Modesto,

which has slightly more than 1,000 Hmong residents. He said the main reason they moved was they liked the city.

Although Thao's family long ago abandoned the traditional Hmong beliefs in shamanism, he understands when patients come in and say that their soul has wandered or that they are ill because an ancestor wants something.

"I tell them I know that, but we still have to do the test," he said. "Usually, I don't meet with a lot of resistance."

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Modesto Bee

Finally, Southeast Asians have a doctor who understands

By DORSEY GRIFFITH

Bee staff writer

Only two months have passed since Dr. Long Thao began practicing medicine at the West Modesto Medical Clinic. And already, word is out.

"When I see a patient, I tell them we offer service to other Southeast Asian people," said Thao, one of the nation's three doctors of Hmong heritage. "They go tell their friends, and pretty soon you have people calling up making appointments."

For many, that's a big step. With limited English-speaking ability, and wary of modern medicine, Vietnam War refugees have traditionally had limited access to health care in this country.

"The main thing is the language and cultural barrier and the lack of interpreters," Thao said. "Because of that, there is a lack of adequate medical care."

Thao, the clinic's new medical manager, wants to change that. He speaks Lao, Hmong, Thai, English and some French. He has a medical assistant who speaks Lao. However, finding trained nurses of Southeast Asian descent still is almost impossible, he added.

Thao, who fled Laos with his family to Thailand and later to the United States after the Vietnam War, said many Southeast Asian people see medical doctors only as a last resort. They may travel to Mexico to buy medicines over the counter and use a herbalist or a shaman, a person believed to have contact with the supernatural.

"The shamans have been there for

thousands of years helping people who have psychological problems," said Thao, whose own father was a shaman before he converted to Christianity.

The belief, he said, is that if a dead ancestor wants something, he or she will make you sick. Offerings to the dead through a shaman can alleviate illness.

"I believe the shaman has his place,"

Thao said. "It's amazing. I've seen it with my own eyes in Laos."

But in this country, Thao hopes the Asian immigrants will plug into the modern health care system to which they are entitled. "Fortunately, most of the Hmong and Lao people have Medi-Cal. But the problem with that is that there aren't many places out there that take Medi-

Cal," he said of the state health insurance program for low income people.

At least now, they have Thao, who, at age 30, has decided how he wants to practice his profession.

"The reason why I took a career in medicine is to help people who are less fortunate than I am," he said. So far, he seems to be succeeding.