

asia

Vietnam's horrific legacy: The children of Agent Orange

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These children all have hydrocephalus from left to right is Huu Loc (aged 3), Ti Ni (12), Tinh (4) and Tu (5). Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD

FOR 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War this is a country which should be rising back to its feet.

Instead it is crippled by the effects of Agent Orange, a chemical sprayed during combat, stripping leaves off trees to remove enemy cover.

Its contaminant, dioxin — now regarded as one of the most toxic chemicals known to man — remains in Vietnam's ecosystem, in the soil and in the fish people eat from rivers.

Nearly 4.8 million Vietnamese people have been exposed, causing 400,000 deaths; the associated illnesses include cancers, birth defects, skin disorders, auto-immune diseases, liver disorders, psychosocial effects, neurological defects and gastrointestinal diseases.

According to the Red Cross of Vietnam, up to one million people are currently disabled or have health problems due to Agent Orange, 100,000 of which are children.

In Ho Chi Minh City's Go Vap orphanage, five-month-old Hong gazes serenely from her metal-barred cot, empty, save for a soft yellow teddy bear watching over her.

From her head grows a huge veiny mass — a rare neural tube defect known as encephalocele, which research suggests could be caused by Agent Orange exposure.

Without successful surgery, Hong's future is bleak. She could suffer from paralysis of the limbs, vision impairment, mental disability and seizures.



Hong Tu, 5 months old, with Encephalocele — a rare neural tube defect characterised by sac-like protrusions of the brain and the membranes that cover it through openings in the skull. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied



Phan Thanh Hong Out, aged 18, suffering from microcephaly (an abnormal smallness of the head, a congenital condition associated with incomplete brain development). Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

In the capital's Tu Du Hospital, within the Children's Agent Orange ward lives 13-year-old Tran, with Fraser Syndrome. A rare genetic disorder, it's characterised by completely fused eyelids, partially webbed fingers and toes and genital malformations. Tran's nurses explain how he spends hours each day crying out relentlessly, rocking himself back and forth in his cot.



Tran Huynh Thuong Sinh, aged 13, with Fraser Syndrome — a rare genetic disorder characterised (as in Tran's case) with partial webbing of the fingers and/or toes, kidney abnormalities, genital malformations and complete fusion of the eyelids. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

Named Agent Orange after the coloured stripe on the barrels it was stored in, the US Army, supporting the South Vietnamese, spent a decade from 1961, spraying approximately 80 million litres over 30,000 square miles of southern Vietnam. The aim was to "smoke out" and weaken the Viet Cong enemy of the north, by decreasing their food supplies.

Studies have shown that dioxin still remains at alarmingly high concentrations in soil, food, human blood and breast milk in people who live near former US military bases.



Nguyen Binh Anh, aged 21, born with ichthyosis (thought to be unrelated to Agent Orange) and mental illness (his scaly skin led him to be nicknamed 'Ca', the Vietnamese word for 'fish'). Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

But it's not just families in Vietnam that are affected. Here in Australia, where almost 60,000 troops served in the war, a growing number of veterans, their children and now grandchildren believe they're battling with the effects of Agent Orange exposure.

Hope White, 39, from the Sunshine Coast, suffers from fibromyalgia, spinal problems and infertility. In 1968, her father was deployed for a year in Vietnam's Phuoc Tuy Province, which was widely sprayed with Agent Orange.

"I've had a number of health problems from a young age — especially with my spine forming. I'm only on my feet through heavy medication, lots of physiotherapy and treatments for my back. I feel like my body's fighting itself all the time, some days I can't even get out of bed," she explains.



Tu, aged 5. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

Huu Loc, aged three. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

Although statistics on the number of people affected by Agent Orange in Australia and their associated illnesses aren't currently recorded, animal studies have shown that exposure to dioxin can lead to female infertility.

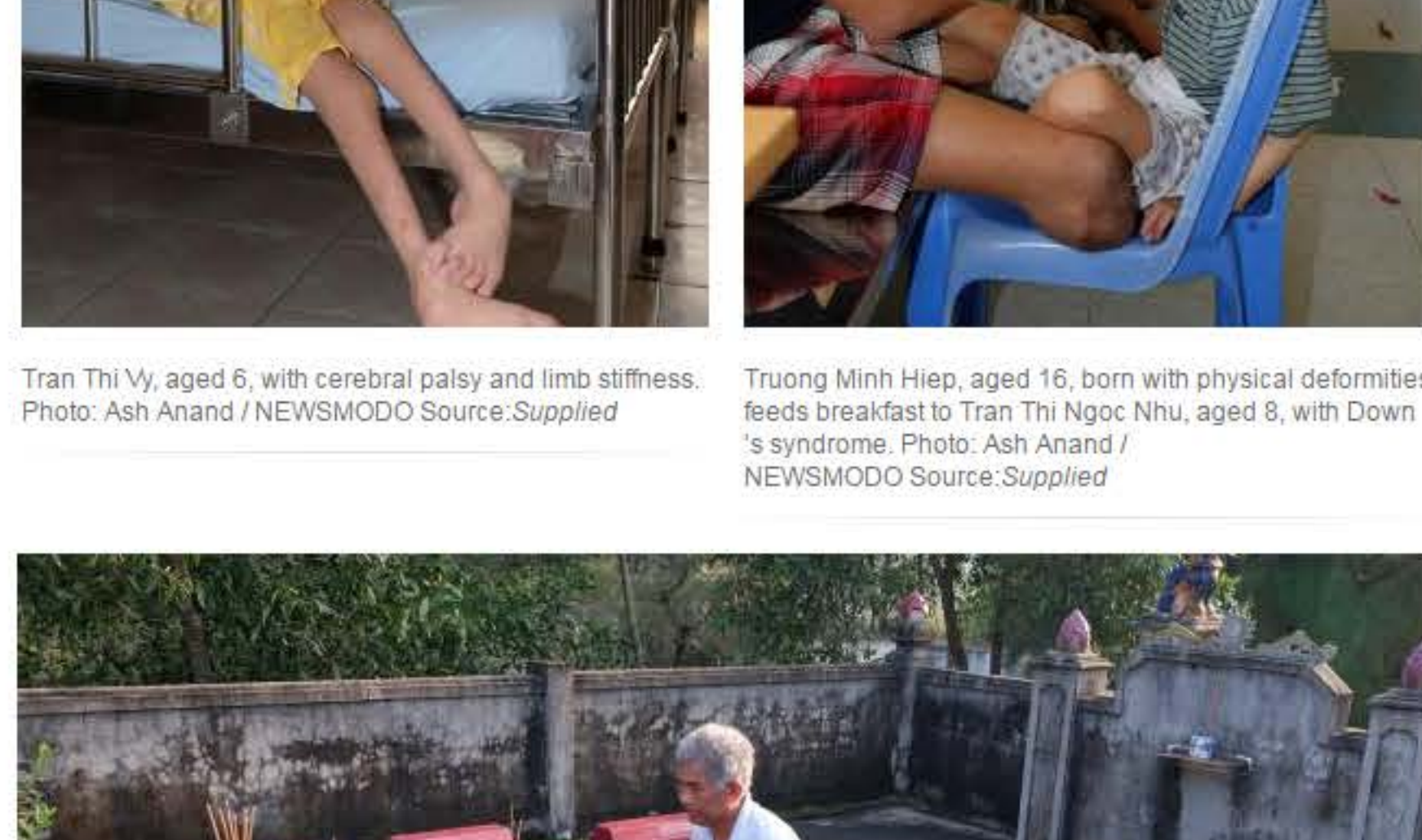
"I've found that childlessness is very common across the daughters of Vietnam veterans that I've spoken with", says Hope. "It's had a massive impact on my husband and me. Not having children has changed our lives significantly."

Dr. Wayne Dwernychuk, a retired senior scientist, adviser with Hatfield and Agent Orange specialist, warns that "countless more generations could be affected in the future". Research suggests that another six to twelve generations will have to pass before dioxin stops affecting the genetic code.



Tran Thi Vy, aged 6, with cerebral palsy and limp stiffness. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

Truong Minh Hiep, aged 16, born with physical deformities feeds breakfast to Tran Thi Ngoc Nhu, aged 8, with Down's syndrome. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied



These pictures are of Hien whose 12 children have passed away from the effects of Agent Orange. He has built a shrine where his children are buried, on top of a dune beside his home. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied



16-year-old Thao in Cu Chi is unable to walk unaided, his legs bound from birth. He practices twice a day on his father's makeshift rehabilitation walkway, steadied by wooden rails — and waits for funding to come through for an operation. A quiet, timid boy who's never been to school because of his disability. Thao sits beside his 15-year-old able-bodied brother, Hieu. Their grandfather fought in the war. As in Thao's case, it's common for Agent Orange illnesses to skip siblings and even entire generations within the same family. Photo: Ash Anand / NEWSMOOD Source: Supplied

Support services, however, are steadily increasing for Agent Orange-affected families in Vietnam. In Da Nang, the NGO, Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange, operates two day centres for disabled children, offering vocational training, rehabilitation and the chance to make friends. It's a safe haven for children often left on the margins of society because of their disabilities.

Charitable donations also help children like 16-year-old Thao in Cu Chi, who's waiting for funding for an operation on his legs. Unable to walk unaided, his legs bound from birth, he practices twice a day on his father's makeshift rehabilitation walkway, steadied by wooden rails.

A quiet, timid boy who's never been to school because of his disability, Thao sits beside his 15-year-old able-bodied brother, Hieu. Their grandfather fought in the war.

"When I see my brother like this, I feel sorry for him", says Hieu. "I help him at home, sometimes I feed him and we play marbles together around the house."

"What do you usually do at home?" I ask Thao. "I just lay there. I don't have anything to do. I don't feel sad, I'm used to it". He only has one wish. "I just want to be able to walk," Thao says quietly.

To make a donation or volunteer your time to help Vietnamese families affected by Agent Orange, visit VAVA (Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange) or SJ Vietnam

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