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Swiss support resumed

A project towards a better model of hospital management

Swiss-Bhutan Teamwork: Dr B Holzer, Bumthang dzongdag Sangye Thinley and Dr R Frey Wangdicholing Hospital, Bumthang 10 June, 2010 - An agreement signed by the health ministry on Monday will see the return of Swiss medical doctors to Bhutan, 16 years after the last one left.

The agreement resumes Swiss support to Wangdicholing hospital in Bumthang for three years. In that time, a project will be carried out, which will attempt to find a model, which increases the efficiency and quality of hospital management.

A Swiss hospital management support committee, headed by the former secretary general of Helvetas, W Külling, will provide USD 350,000 in funding.

In a departure from normal health services here, the project also aims to involve the local community in providing health care.

"A hospital doesn't just fall down from heaven or, in this case, the health ministry," said Dr Richard Frey. "Local citizens should participate in health services and support it."

Dr Frey, who served in Wangdicholing hospital in the '70s, said that, since 2000, health services in the hospital had remained almost the same. "The population has increased, the number of patients has increased, but the equipment has remained the same." He added, "There should be at least one or two doctors at the hospital, but there's only one; and sometimes, even that doctor is away, like for further training." He also explained that medical services should be available for 24 hours, which is not possible with only one doctor. "There are many things to be improved."

In 2008, the health ministry contacted NGO Helvetas on the possibility of resuming support. In May this year, support resumed with Dr Frey, who introduced Dr B Holzer. He will remain in Wangdicholing hospital for a year.

Swiss medical support began in 1972. Two years later, a small hospital was established in Wangdicholing. In 1992 the present 40-bed hospital built by Helvetas was established. Four years later, Helvetas medical support concluded.

"In 1974 it was just a two storied building," said Dr Frey, "no water supply, no lights, wooden floors, and ceilings through which dust would fall through every time someone walked above you." With limited equipment, the Swiss doctors treated everything from bear attack victims to the common cold, he said. The present project, he said, will not only provide doctors but also equipment.

The present project, if successful, will be replicated in other dzongkhags by the government.

By Gyalsten K Dorji