

Nun's free porridge helps poor pay medical bills

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Catholic nun hands out porridge near Hanoi hospital

HANOI, VIETNAM

Poor patients and their families say that the free food given to them by Catholic nuns is a big boon to them. The money they save as a result goes a long way to paying medical fees.

Patients and relatives at the Vietnam-Cuba Hospital, Eye Hospital, and K1 and Viet-Duc hospitals in Hanoi have been receiving a daily helping of chao (rice porridge) from nuns of the Saint Paul de Chartres Convent.

"We serve free chao to 300 patients a day from Mondays to Fridays to help them save money," said Sister Brigitte Vu Kim Binh. Most of the patients are from poor rural areas and have to spend at least 100,000 dong (US\$5.50) a day on hospital fees, food and medicine, she added.

At 10 a.m. on weekdays, Sister Binh can be seen pushing a hand-cart carrying a big cauldron of chao to the gate of her 126-year-old convent. There, about 100 patients from the nearby Vietnam-Cuba and Eye hospitals, or their relatives, wait to receive the food.

Later, at 4 p.m. two laywomen hand out chao to 200 other patients from the Viet-Duc and K1 hospitals which are situated about one kilometer away.

Tran Van Dung, 40, who, along with his father, have been receiving chao from the nuns for six months, said "We are extremely grateful to the Catholic nuns for the food. It has been very helpful in my father's fight against throat cancer."

Dung, from Bac Ninh province who is not a Catholic, said he's saved 1.2 million dong, thanks to the free food. He has used the money to pay for his father's treatment at K1 Hospital.

Some patients say they can save 7,000-10,000 dong a day. That is what it would cost them if they were to buy chao from local restaurants.

The idea to give free food arose some years ago after the nuns visited patients in hospitals and saw that they

lacked clothes, money, medicine and food. They then decided to start their service in 2000, said Sister Binh.

The nun, who is in charge of the congregation's charitable activities, said she, other nuns and two laywomen buy meat and vegetable from markets to prepare the food early in the morning. The total cost is 600,000 dong a day and some people donate money to cover it, she added.

Sister Binh said that elderly people, children and people suffering from cancer who find it difficult to eat much rice, fish or meat are more able to stomach chao. "We offer them chao because it is easily digestible," she said.

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