

Switzerland – Cambodia

# Milestones of Kantha Bopha Hospitals – yesterday and today

by “Foundation of Children’s Hospitals Kantha Bopha”\*

The history of the Kantha Bopha hospitals is an impressive chapter in humanitarian aid. In 1992, Swiss paediatricians *Beat Richner* (1947–2018) and his colleague *Peter Studer* (1947–2020) rebuilt the hospital in Phnom Penh at the request of the king, which had been reduced to rubble after the war. In 1999, the *Jayavarman VII Hospital* opened its doors in the north of the country. Today, we care for around 3,000 children every day at both locations, with five hospitals and a maternity clinic, and provide over 2,700 jobs for local people.

Over the past 34 years, a network has been established that now treats around 85 percent of all sick and injured children in Cambodia free of charge. Child mortality in the country has fallen steadily during this period.

## Child mortality under 5 years of age in Cambodia

1975	over 20 percent
1980	over 16 percent
1990	over 12 percent
2000	4.8 percent
2010	4.4 percent
2020	2.6 percent
Today	2.2 percent

## For healthy hearts

In the early 1990s, the team primarily treated children suffering from malnutrition and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, encephalitis, and dengue fever. In the case of tuberculosis in particular, it was important to treat not only those who were acutely ill but entire families to prevent them from infecting each other again.



The Swiss paediatricians Peter Studer and Beat Richner were the founders of the hospitals. (all pictures ma)

This approach soon proved effective, with child mortality falling steadily to 4.4 percent in 2010. After careful analysis of the data, it quickly became clear that most of the remaining deaths were due to heart disease. This was the starting signal for *Beat Richner’s* “Heart Project”, which he launched together with Prof. *Oliver Kretschmar* from the University Children’s Hospital Zurich: In 2011, the first cardiac surgery department and the first cardiac catheterization laboratory for children in Cambodia opened in Siem Reap, and in 2019, cardiac surgery was also introduced in Phnom Penh. Today, more than 1,100 cardiac procedures and operations are performed annually.

## Further training and modernization

Neonatology wards for premature babies with intensive care and nursing, as well as intensive care units for older children, have been established. Further training has been added in specialist areas such as gastroenterology (diseases of the gastrointestinal tract), visceral surgery (surgery on organs inside the abdominal and pelvic cavities), obstetrics and gynaecology, nephro-

\* “Kantha Bopha Paediatric Hospital Foundation”: The five Kantha Bopha hospitals in Cambodia are managed and supported by the Swiss foundation, which is based in Zurich. Its mission is to ensure the development of the hospitals and to raise funds to finance their activities. On the ground, the chief medical officers and the managing director are responsible for the hospitals – they took over

the management following the death of the two founders in May 2020.

Everyone involved – the members of the foundation board as well as the staff in Cambodia – continues to run the paediatric hospitals in the spirit of the founders. *Beat Richner* and *Peter Studer* would be delighted to see the new generation taking over with enthusiasm and passion.

logy (kidney diseases), orthopaedics (musculo-skeletal system), neurosurgery (surgery on the central and peripheral nervous system), and infectious diseases. In addition, imaging equipment has been continuously modernized to ensure accurate diagnoses, and staff have been trained in the latest techniques.

To this day, the continuing education of local staff is carried out by specialists from the University Children's Hospital Zurich and other Swiss hospitals. Depending on the topic, missions to Cambodia take place annually or every two years – however, teaching and professional exchange do not only take place during these medical missions on site, but throughout the year thanks to telephone meetings, video conferences, and email exchanges.

### Hope for children with cancer

While leukaemia in children has been treated in Phnom Penh for almost two decades, in the fall of 2023, under the direction of Prof. *Felix Niggli*, former chief physician of oncology at the Children's Hospital in Zurich, we also began treating other types of cancer, including liver, kidney, and brain tumours. A precise diagnosis is essential for the adequate treatment of such tumours. With the support of a pathologist from Switzerland, the previously rudimentary laboratory has been further developed in a targeted manner.

Even today, not all diagnostic options are available, and the therapeutic spectrum remains limited compared to Europe. Nevertheless, effective tumour control has now been achieved in several hundred children with cancer. In addition, there is close cooperation between the hospitals in Phnom Penh. This means that children who are treated at our hospital receive the necessary radiotherapy at another hospital in the city.



*Children with leukaemia and, since 2023, also with other forms of cancer receive appropriate treatment.*



*Since 2011, children have been able to undergo heart surgery in Siem Reap.*

Video conferences are also held regularly in the form of *tumour boards*, where colleagues from Cambodia discuss individual cases with a team of experts from Switzerland. The progress made has finally made it possible to treat children with cancer at the Siem Reap Children's Hospital since fall 2025. Highly motivated teams at both locations are committed to caring for children with cancer with great dedication and within the limits of their resources. Since not all children can be cured, organizing dignified palliative care has also become one of their important tasks.

### Farewell to the founders

All these developmental steps have been taken gradually and were sensible and necessary from a medical point of view. Unfortunately, we have had to follow this path in recent years without our two founders: Beat Richner returned to

#### **“When Life hurts, Siem Reap heals”**

(sv) In 2025, medical student Jan Han completed a two-month internship at the Kantha Bopha Foundation's hospital in Siem Reap. He returned “enriched” and full of enthusiasm from his experiences at the hospital and his travels around the country. Under the title “When Life hurts, Siem Reap heals”, he is exhibiting his photographs from this period at the Photobastei in Zurich. Images such as “War and Peace”, “Girl from Kep” and “Balance Act” offer insights into everyday life in Cambodia and are available for purchase. The proceeds will go to the foundation.

**Venue:**

Photobastei, Sihlquai 125, CH-8005 Zurich  
<https://www.photobastei.ch/site/activity-details?id=848>

**Closing event:**

2 May 2026, exhibition ends 3 May 2026.

Switzerland in 2017 for health reasons and passed away in September 2018. His good friend and companion Peter Studer passed away in May 2020.

What remains are their employees in Cambodia and the members of the Foundation Board in Switzerland—together, we have all continued to develop the hospitals in the spirit of the founders. The Kantha Bopha hospitals are the legacy of Beat Richner and Peter Studer – largely funded by Swiss donations, run with enormous dedication by the Cambodian hospital management, and internationally recognized. Lives are saved here every day. Sustainably, professionally, and with an eye to the future.

### **What does the future hold?**

The high standards in the individual specialist areas will be maintained and optimized where necessary. Mental health has also become a focus in recent years: psychiatrists are now on duty at both locations for the children and are consulted whenever necessary for treatment.

For Prof. Dr. med. *Ky Santy*, hospital director in Phnom Penh, the planned introduction of haemodialysis for acute kidney failure is a ray of hope: “The new treatment will save the lives of children in critical situations.” He is also concerned about the well-being of his employees. New buildings have been constructed and renovations carried out to improve working conditions for staff and accessibility for patients.

Prof. Dr. *Yay Chantana*, hospital director in Siem Reap, adds: “In all areas, strengthening



*Surgical procedures on the heart, abdominal organs, the central and peripheral nervous systems, and others are performed daily.*

professionalism, good clinical practice, patient-centred care, and patient safety remain a key priority in order to maintain quality and public trust.”

The Kantha Bopha hospitals also receive significant support and donations from Cambodia – from private individuals and institutions alike. In addition, there is the *Cambodia Kantha Bopha Foundation*, whose statutory purpose is to provide financial support to our hospitals. All of the foundation's activities and efforts contribute to ensuring the sustainable and long-term operation of the hospitals.

Source: <https://www.beat-richner.ch/en/post/milestones-of-kantha-bopha-hospitals-yesterday-and-today>, 29 March 2026

### **The history from 1992 to 2023 (Video)**

<https://www.beat-richner.ch/en/post/milestones-of-kantha-bopha-hospitals-yesterday-and-today>