

Let the Yak Calves Take Care of the Milking

note: Surmang Foundation has had a Community Health Worker program since 2005, whose result has been a spike in the number of healthy deliveries of babies and a decline in maternal mortality. This program is one half of the Surmang model: increased provider capacity and increased access to health care services.



Surmang, East Tibet, Sept. 3, 2011. Early morning sun peaking out over the mountain, jammed into an SUV, we bounced and suffered the dusty road on our way from the Surmang Clinic to Rongdou and Mendo. These two villages have over 20 CHWs (Community Health Workers), farming and nomadic women whose work connects the Surmang Clinic to these far-flung regions of Kham, eastern Tibet. We were going there to make sure all of the CHWs would come to the Health

Festival starting on September 6. It was also, for most of us, our first foray into the field since arriving at Surmang on Aug. 31.

Our group, all published, internationally recognized rural public health experts have worked extensively in places like Angola, Afghanistan, Malawi, Nepal, and Darfur. Now Yushu Prefecture. We --Drs. Amy Levi, Mariette Wiebenga, Mary Wellhoner (and 17 year-old daughter Zia Mars), Dawn Factor Surmang Clinic Director, and Dr. Phuntsok Dongdrup-- were launched to the villages of Rongdou and Mendo where the foundation has active CHW projects.

An hour and a half on this butt-numbing road, we arrive at Rongdou and our group was greeted by Drogha, Rongdou's primary CHW. She welcomed us into her home, and settled us in with Tibetan tea, bread, and apples while young men





on motorcycles summoned the other CHWs. Dr. Phuntsok introduced the purpose of our visit: to make sure all would be joining us at the Festival in three days' time, since the event was the primary activity for the foundation this year.

They all quickly arrived. Although shy and polite, the women at first equivocated. Then, Pema Kandro, the lead CHW in Mendo spinning a

Tibetan prayer wheel, said she was coming for the whole five days. Then Drensay said she would come. There was conversation about who couldn't come and why: one woman was pregnant; another had to care for her sick grandmother, yet another had to milk the yaks. Pema Kandro said loudly, let yak calves take care of the milking! Everyone agreed; her enthusiasm was infectious. It was also clarified that breastfeeding women would of course be allowed to come with their babies, and the pregnant woman would have access to exceptional care for her birth. When we left we had the enthusiastic assent from all 12 of the women --that they would come for all or part of the festival. In a short time our meeting completed the arc from Zen tea ceremony to a tent revival meeting. Welcome to Tibet!

We piled in the car and headed for Mendo, a short ride away. Again, we were served Tibetan tea and bread, sitting in the shade outside of the home of CHW Sonam Drolma. Our bowls were continuously filled with butter tea. A similar situation to our first stop evolved; one woman said she would come, although the response wasn't quite as immediate. One older man who had come to the meeting wasn't sure he wanted his daughter-in-law, a CHW, to attend; she was nursing a baby, but he thought his daughter, who wasn't a



CHW, should come. A bit of horse-trading ensued, and he agreed that both could come (Dawn was encouraged to urge him to allow the daughter to come, since she could read and write, and the daughter-in-law couldn't). Sonam Drolma's husband, whose hospitality we were enjoying, then volunteered to milk the yaks so that his wife could attend the festival. Success! All but two of the CHWs at our impromptu meeting would be attending.

We reassembled in the dusty car, and headed back through the mountains and along the river back to Surmang, with an increased sense of excitement about the upcoming gathering. As we returned to the clinic Tibetan tents were being raised for the Festival. It was a great day.

