

## **Geriatric Psychiatry Fellowship Program: Lesson Learned from Thailand**

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### **Key highlights:**

- Geriatric psychiatry is a new fellowship program offered in Thailand.
- There is a high demand for psychiatrists specializing in older adults in Thailand as it is an aging society.
- Despite high demand, geriatric psychiatry fellows are in limited number.

## **The psychogeriatric service and development of Geriatric psychiatry in Thailand**

A geriatric psychiatry service provided by certified geriatric psychiatrists trained overseas has previously been available. However, the first geriatric psychiatry unit was founded at Chiang Mai University in 2007 by Prof. Nahathai Wongpakaran, Head of the unit. It provides education and research for second-year psychiatry residents, medical students, pharmacy students, and trainees from other programs (e.g., family medicine and graduate students in mental health). Chulalongkorn University established a dementia clinic in 2001 to provide the best medical services and residency training in dementia care and neuropsychiatry. In 2014, the geriatric psychiatry rotation was started for third-year residents in psychiatry, neurology residents, gerontologists, and psychiatrists.

Dr. Thitiporn Supasitthumrong, a geriatric psychiatrist and curriculum coordinator for Chulalongkorn University, shares that she looks for candidates with a positive attitude towards complex holistic elderly care along with the necessary motivation and clinical skills. Prof. Nahathai Wongpakaran adds that trainees should have an optimistic perspective working in multidisciplinary teams. Moreover, trainees should apply new knowledge and health technology in patient care. Besides that, they should work well with the patient's family members or caregivers.

### **Geriatric psychiatry curriculum**

The training curriculum includes didactic coursework, clinical practice, and research. The clinical work includes geriatric psychiatry, geriatrics, neurology, rehabilitation medicine, and palliative care. Dr. Supasitthumrong shares that fellows will benefit from learning geriatric mental health and holistic care for older adults, as well as working with their families and multidisciplinary teams. The core competency covers six domains: patient care, medical knowledge, professionalism, practice-based learning, interpersonal and communication skills, and system-based practice. Prof. Nahathai Wongpakaran also adds that fellows must benefit from the experience in long-term care settings. At Chiang Mai University, the geriatric psychiatry unit has extended its service to a provincial residential home since 2010.

### **Fellowship Training in Geriatric psychiatry in Thailand**

Fellowship Training in Geriatric psychiatry has been developed in Thailand since 2018. It is a 2-year program following residency training in psychiatry. It accepts psychiatrists with the Diploma Thai Board of Psychiatry or residents in their final year. The trainees in the program are called fellows. The graduates of this program receive the Diploma Board of Subspecialty in Geriatric Psychiatry granted by the Medical Council of Thailand. The applicants must apply for the position directly to the Medical Council of Thailand, which opens three rounds before the academic year begins. The fellowship training program follows the World Federation of Medical Education, and the first fellow entered the program in July 2019.

## **Geriatric Psychiatry Fellowship Training Sites**

The first three training sites that received approval from the Medical Council of Thailand to accept fellows in the academic year 2019 were 1) The Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai Province, in the northern region; 2) The Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen Province, in the northeastern region; and 3) Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand

The number of positions opened were two each per year. Later, two more training sites were opened, i.e., the Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine at Ramathibodi Hospital, and the Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital. Both are at Mahidol University, Bangkok. The positions available are 2 per year and 3 per year, respectively. More training sites are in the process of getting approved by the Medical Council of Thailand. The capacity of each site to accept trainees depends on the number of patients each training site provides care for and the number of instructors.

### **A three-year evaluation of the Geriatric psychiatry fellowship program**

We are estimated to have at least two fellows per training site annually and have yielded approximately 8-10 geriatric psychiatrists since 2019. However, the actual outcome is that only 1-2 fellows completed the fellowship, and 1-2 trainees per year entered the training program in all of Thailand. Importantly, one training institution will be suspended soon due to a lack of trainee recruitment.

Surprisingly, the number of psychiatrists or residents in their final year who want to continue fellowship Training in Geriatric psychiatry is far less than expected. There are a few potential explanations: first, the field of geriatric psychiatry might need to be more attractive to general psychiatrists. Lower interest in geriatric psychiatry may also be due to the complexity of the field and the requirement for substantial knowledge in neuropsychiatry. Another reason is that the government allows other providers to care for geriatric patients, not just geriatric psychiatrists. Although this may increase access to care for older adults when seen by general psychiatrists, it could also discourage general psychiatrists from getting further training. Due to the limited number of psychiatric providers in Thailand, geriatric psychiatrists

may have even a greater burden; they can be expected to see adults and even adolescents in addition to the geriatric patients without additional compensation for such an increased burden.

### **Strengths**

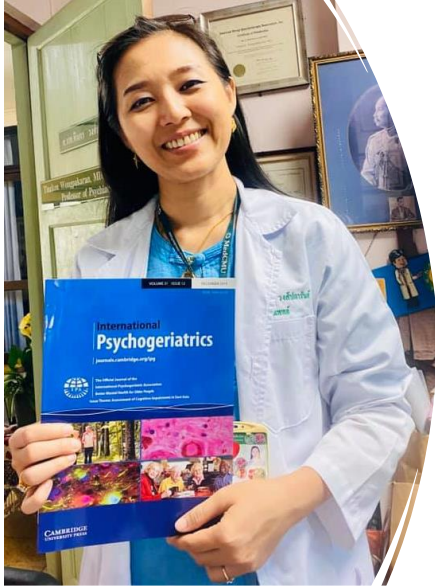
Our training program, however, has been established to develop professionalism and the core competencies unique to the definition of a qualified geriatric psychiatrist. Therefore, the complete trainee will be acknowledged as a certified geriatric psychiatrist.

### **Challenges**

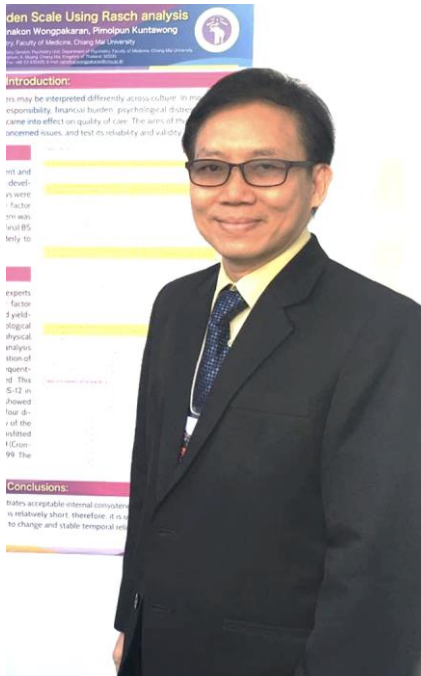
Ironically, while the government and society in general are concerned about the burden of the aging population and their mental health, there is a lack of funding support from the government for geriatric psychiatry subspecialty training. Government support like increased salary or 2-year study leave could be beneficial.

### **Future of Geriatric Psychiatry training in Thailand**

The trend of training in geriatric psychiatry is declining in many countries worldwide, and the government does not consider geriatric psychiatrists urgent. However, many psychiatrists on the front lines have reported that state-of-the-art knowledge in geriatric psychiatry for general psychiatrists is necessary, but a 2-year training program is long for them. If the situation continues with no trainees for five years, some training sites may be subject to suspension of training. The training institutions may need to review the curriculum by considering alternatives, such as changing to a one-year or shorter certification or a research fellowship. Also, extending the training through international trainees might be an option.



Prof. Nahathai Wongpakaran is a geriatric psychiatrist and head of the Geriatric Psychiatry Unit at Chiang Mai University. She completed the geriatric psychiatry fellowship program at the University of Toronto in 2006. Then, in 2018, she received the board of subspecialty in geriatric psychiatry from the Medical Council of Thailand.



Prof. Tinakon Wongpakaran is a psychiatrist who specializes both in psychotherapy and geriatric psychiatry. Prof. Wongpakaran completed a fellowship in psychotherapy at the University of Toronto in 2006. He received the board of subspecialty in geriatric psychiatry from the Medical Council of Thailand in 2019.



Dr. Thitiporn is a geriatric psychiatrist and curriculum coordinator at Chulalongkorn University. She completed the geriatric psychiatry fellowship

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