In addition to producing competent and qualified graduates, RACHA’s Basic Life Saving Skills (LSS) training program for midwives has led to a number of exciting and unexpected developments. Through the training of just a handful of active midwives, RACHA is beginning to make a dent in Cambodia’s troubled health care system.

During the latter part of the 1980s, a “catch up” program was initiated training women who had at least six years of elementary education to become midwives. After the first democratically elected Cambodian government took power in 1993, it continued to train new cadres of health care professionals; midwives were one category of providers on which this effort focused. As their government salaries are extremely low, most midwives work both within the public health centers and the private sector. Increased interaction with their communities through their private sector work has led to the expansion of midwives’ clinical role to include treating a wide array of illnesses and health problems, in addition to attending deliveries. Midwives have, in effect, become the major frontline health care providers throughout rural Cambodia.

While their role in the health care system has become critical, traditional midwifery training often covers only theoretical instruction in lecture format and is not based on practical experience or skill competency, thus gives little or no attention to life threatening complications associated with pregnancy, labor or delivery. Recognizing midwives’ fundamental importance, RACHA developed a hands-on, performance-based midwifery skill upgrading program called Basic Life Saving Skills. This program became Cambodia’s first midwifery training based specifically on the development of clinical competence in life saving skills rather than just the development of knowledge about these skills. Basic LSS focuses on infection prevention, improved techniques for the management of labor and delivery, management of postpartum hemorrhage, infant resuscitation and breastfeeding support, as well as antenatal and postpartum care and working with communities.

The Battambang Provincial Hospital was identified as a suitable training center because the number of
deliveries occurring there was sufficient to support the competency-based training needs of Basic LSS. Prior to the start of training, RACHA invested $2900 to refurbish a dormitory and an on-call room for midwives, both on the hospital compound. This area was also used to house the trainees during the course of their training.

The American College of Nurses and Midwives (ACNM) designed the original Basic LSS curriculum and two ACNM consultants adapted this for Cambodia and conducted the TOT course. The first training session occurred in March 1999 with the ACNM trainers mentoring the new training team through this first course to complete their TOT. The trainees, in groups of six, have been carefully selected based on having a government job where they can use LSS skills and on their overall level of existing activity in attending births.

RACHA’s original goal for the LSS program was to improve the quality of services LSS midwives would be able to provide in both their public and private work. A year later, FIGURES. However, several unexpected events have occurred that have enhanced the overall value of the LSS training dramatically.

Local TV and radio gave the new training considerable coverage, highlighting various aspects of the LSS program. This publicity in part led the LSS trainers to raise their private practice fees from $20 to $30, an increase of fifty percent, and quite a sizable expenditure for rural Cambodians. While this was first considered a disappointing development, trainers reported either no change, or a slight increase, in their client load following the price hike. That Cambodians are willing to pay for higher quality services that reduce the risk of death for mothers and newborns was seen as a clear, positive, statement about the initial success of the program.

Recognizing this success, Unicef has since contracted with the Battambang Provincial Hospital and the LSS trainers to conduct Basic LSS training for Battambang midwives when the trainers are on their off-months from RACHA-sponsored training. Further, the provincial hospitals in Battambang and Pursat have benefited greatly from the LSS program. The number of deliveries at the Battambang Hospital has been increasing and women are coming from farther distances to give birth there. The success of the Battambang Hospital’s maternity ward following the first LSS training session has led the hospital director to expect it to carry a major portion of his cost-recovery program. RACHA also upgraded Pursat Hospital’s maternity wing and this new high quality
facility, coupled with its eight LSS trained midwives on staff, led to a 50 percent increase in deliveries there from 1998 through the end of 1999.

The renovated maternity wing of the Pursat Hospital has also become the training center for RACHA’s latest LSS off-shoot program. Since each LSS training session can only accommodate six midwives, and since one eligibility requirement for midwives who wish to be trained is that they are already delivering some babies each month, it is impossible at this point to give all midwives LSS training. Thus, RACHA adapted the antenatal care (ANC) portion of the BASIC LSS curriculum and utilized LSS-trained midwives from the Pursat Referral Hospital to train non-LSS trained midwives in ANC. So far, **FIGURES** midwives in Pursat have been trained in upgraded ANC skills and this project is now continuing in RACHA’s other focus provinces, Siem Reap and Kampot. RACHA has also begun a similar project in Siem Reap as more midwives return to that province with LSS training.

The success of the competency-based training model introduced through RACHA’s Basic LSS has led Cambodia’s Ministry of Health to explore the possibility of using a similar program to train all midwives nation-wide.