



Strengthening our relationships in **Papua New Guinea**

The College has the biggest international aid commitment of any of the medical colleges in Australia

In a strong endorsement of the decision made last year by the College to refocus its aid program to Papua New Guinea (PNG) away from the provision of visiting specialist teams toward capacity building and mentoring, two PNG surgeons this year qualified in their specialties in paediatric surgery and urology.

Dr Benjamin Yapo became the third Paediatric surgeon to qualify in PNG, his training funded through the Surgeons International Award and supported by Mr David Croaker, Mr Albert Shung, Mr Paddy Dewan and PNG paediatric surgeons Mr McLee Matthew and Okti Poki.

Dr Timmy Tingnee qualified as PNG's second urologist, his training in Australia supported by the Rowan Nicks Pacific Islands Scholarship, the mentoring of Mr Don Moss and Mr Andre Lalak from Australia and in his home country by PNG's first urologist Dr Osborne Liko.

Over the same time period, the local provision of cardiac surgery was also profoundly

boosted by the return of surgeons Dr Noah Tapaua and Dr Lister Lunn and anaesthetist Arvin Karu following their training in Australia and India.

With 2009 now being described as the start of a new era in the relationship between the College and PNG, a milestone was also reached in June when Dr Tapaua conducted ten open-heart surgeries with the assistance of Dr Arvin Karu, the first such surgeries to have been conducted by a local team under the umbrella of the Operation Open Heart program.

Dr Tapaua, from the island province of New Ireland, chose to specialise as a cardiothoracic surgeon in 2006 because of the lack of such services in PNG. After receiving the Surgeons International Award in 2007, he arrived in Melbourne to begin his training at the Geelong Hospital under the supervision of Mr Morteza Mohajeri.

He completed his training attachment in early 2009 and is aiming to become the first surgeon-educator of cardiothoracic surgery

in PNG. He has now been nominated for the Rowan Nicks Scholarship to help fund his further training in India.

Speaking of his recent achievement in conducting the open heart surgeries, Dr Tapaua described it as a "significant step forward both personally and for the country" and gave particular thanks to the College and the cardiothoracic unit at Geelong Hospital.

He said that before the Operation Open Heart team, funded by AusAID, arrived in late May, he had also led the local team including anaesthetist Dr Karu in performing 16 Patient Ductus Arteriosus ligations.

"The support of the College has been tremendous in getting to this level. With the further support of the College, my colleague Dr Lister Lunn and Dr Karu were also sent to India for training in cardiac surgery and anaesthesia," Dr Tapaua said.

"Currently we don't have a cardiothoracic unit but we are working toward establishing one by early next year to allow us to provide

this vital surgery for the 6.5 million people in PNG. At present we are not there yet because we still need specialist cardiac equipment including a bypass machine and we are yet to train one or two perfusionists and intensivists. However, while we will still depend on outside visits we have started on the right path.”

The milestones made in the expansion of surgical services in PNG in 2009 were achieved under the new programme model known as the Health Education and Clinical Services Program (HECS) which was established to allow for greater PNG control in deciding areas of medical need. This program is funded by the Australian Government through AusAID.

Designed to replace and combine the PNG Tertiary Health Services (THS) Project and the Medical School Support Project, HECS will be run by a PNG management board, headed by the Dean of the Medical School, which will then advise the College as to which specialist visits or the type of educational assistance are required.

According to the Chair of the College's International Committee Professor David Watters, the changes were made to reflect the huge advances made in countries such as PNG and Fiji in the education and training of their own specialist surgeons.

He said 70 general surgeons had been trained in PNG since 1979 and that there were now five local orthopaedic surgeons, three head and neck surgeons, two urologists, one neurosurgeon, three paediatric surgeons, two cardiothoracic surgeons, ten ear nose and throat surgeons and ten ophthalmologists, almost all of whom have continued to work in PNG, with some now in practice in the private sector.

“This has been a fantastic achievement for surgery in PNG and is a credit to the College and the volunteers who have given their time and support,” he said.

“The provision of Rowan Nicks Scholarships and the Surgeons International Award have also been of great benefit in enhancing the training opportunities available to PNG trainees and surgeons.”

Professor Watters said that while the College was still managing the specialist team visit (formerly PNG THS) component of the HECS program during its initial transition phase, full control would devolve to PNG next year which could see a further refining in the type of assistance provided by the College.

“As the management board takes over next year the type of assistance required by the College could further change. There is a great need there for the development of other specialties such as cardiology, anaesthesia, oncology and obstetrics so the focus may move away from surgery for the simple reason that the surgical



1. Launch of the HECS Program (Port Moresby): Professor Sir Isi Kevau (Dean SMHS & HECS Program Director), Sir Puka Temu (PNG Deputy Prime Minister & Minister for Lands & Physical Planning & Mining), Professor Ross Hynes (Vice Chancellor UPNG), Dr Paison Dakulala (Deputy Secretary NDoH), Dr Varage Laka (Specialist SMO, NDoH). 2. Dr Adolf Saweri (Chairperson Clinical Sciences Division, SMHS & UPNG), Professor Sir Isi Kevau, Professor Ross Hynes, Sir Puka Temu, Mrs Robin Scott Charlton (Chief of Operations AusAID). 3. Noah Tapua 4. Ben Yapo 5. Timmy Tingnee with Grace Warren

aid programmes have worked so well,” he said.

“However, the population of PNG has almost doubled since 1989 which means that the delivery of services to regional areas remains a huge challenge which is why team visits will still be needed.

“Yet we hope that each team visit has an educational component and also that each team has PNG members if not a PNG leader. There also remains a great and on-going need for academic support and in future the College could be asked to focus on the provision of examiners, thesis supervisors and mentors.”

Professor Watters particularly praised the efforts of David Hamilton and external examiner Hamish Ewing in supporting the MMed program. He said the College had shown a considerable commitment to medical education in PNG. Last year, the President, Professor Ian Gough attended and addressed the Annual PNG Medical Society Symposium while the College was represented by Vice-President, Mr Ian Dickinson in September this year.

He said that more than one million of AusAid funding has been for the provision of specialist visits to PNG and hopes for more targeted visits under the new model with a stronger emphasis on skills transfer.

“While the College has a place on the advisory group where strategic decisions are made and also on the co-ordinating group which implements the decisions, we will take less of a leading role in terms of the services we provide,” he said.

“That’s a good thing. All these changes reflect our support for the desire that medical professionals in PNG take on more leadership and that in turn reflects how successful and important has been the contribution made by countless Fellows over many years in improving surgical services to the country.

“Since the mid-1990s, our international aid programs have all been based on an evolving approach which recognises each particular country’s needs and aspirations and in the case of PNG it was clear that capacity building was the best contribution we could make now and into the future. The surgeons who have qualified this year are a testament to that approach.

“The College has the biggest international aid commitment of any of the medical colleges in Australia and I would even expect that we could be asked to provide other Colleges and health bodies with advice and guidance on the provision of health services and education because of the success of our partnership with PNG over more than three decades.”