Paediatric team works in PNG

Fortnight in Papua New Guinea highlights needs of our nearest neighbour

Achieving a record number of surgeries and dinner with the Australian High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the PNG Minister-Counsellor of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), made for a memorable two-week visit for the latest paediatric team to visit PNG.

Headed by Dr Albert Shun of Sydney’s Children’s Hospital at Westmead, the team arrived at the Mount Hagen General Hospital on July 17 to conduct an initial consultation clinic after news of the visit was broadcast widely over the “tok saw” radio.

The night before, however, violence erupted in the Emergency Department after a man was brought into hospital having been critically injured in a car accident, with the victim’s family blaming a group of workers for his plight.

According to visiting team member, paediatric anaesthetist Dr Michael Cooper, the Emergency Department staff simply locked and dodged the bullets as the shootout, regained a measure of calm and continued treating the patient.

“It can be a wild place the highlands of Papua New Guinea,” Dr Cooper noted dryly.

“But the staff members up there are amazing. We walked in on the Sunday morning following and it was as if nothing much had happened.”

The July PNG visit (funded by AusAID through the Health Education and Clinical Services (HECS) Program and the RACS) represented the largest paediatric surgical team ever assembled to treat some of the country’s sickest children, many of whom had been specifically selected for treatment by the team not only for Dr Shun’s expertise, but also for that of Dr Cooper.

With no specialist paediatric anaesthetist currently working in PNG, some children with congenital heart disease or those who had previously experienced anaesthetic-induced cardiac arrhythmias were selected as requiring his paediatric anaesthetic expertise.

Along with the two paediatric specialists from Sydney, the team comprised local paediatric surgeons Dr Mcler Mathew; Dr Ben Yapo; Dr Oki Piki and general surgeon and paediatric trainee Dr Jack Molu.

Working out of Mount Hagen hospital first and later moving to Port Moresby, the team performed more major cases in one visit than had ever been achieved during the July trip.

“The High Commission residence in Port Moresby makes for a lovely setting for entertaining, looking over the harbour as it does, and we had an excellent, informative and stimulating evening.”

Dr Shun said that while the post-operative death of one child had cast a shadow over the trip, he believed it remained in the best interests of the children and the local paediatric surgeons to allocate the visiting team the most difficult cases.

“The death of the child was upsetting but in some ways just illustrates the constant limitations affecting surgery in countries such as PNG,” he said.

“The pathology was more complex than anticipated, which relates to the lack of diagnostic facilities there while there is no specialist paediatric ICU unit in the country for postoperative care.

“That means that no matter how good the surgery and anaesthetic support, you still confront limitations in infrastructure, skills and expertise that we take for granted in Australia.

“Yet still it is the job of such visiting teams to undertake the most complex cases not only because we get it right the first time when operating on a child they have the opportunity of living a wonderfully normal life, but also because we can use the cases to train the local paediatric surgeons.”

The needs are great

Dr Shun described seeing the increasing skills and expertise of the local surgeons as a highlight of the visit but said the country would only be self-sufficient in the surgical care of children when there were 15 such surgeons located across the country rather than the three now working there.

“There is such great need in PNG,” he said.

“They need specialist paediatric nurses, specialist anaesthetists, specialist ICU facilities for babies and neonates, but I can’t really see that happening probably until the PNG community at large fully appreciates the fact that babies and children have a right to be treated with equal although limited health resources.

“Dr Shun said that as such, specialist team visits such as the July trip would continue to be required while Dr Cooper, also from the Children’s Hospital at Westmead, is in the process of driving changes within the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) to develop a more coordinated aid program for PNG.

He said this would include providing funding for two visits per year to upgrade and enhance the skills of Anaesthetic Scientific Officers and Registrars.

“The work done by the RACS through AusAID funding has had a major impact on the surgical services offered to the people of PNG, but that has not flowed through so much into anaesthetic support,” he said.

“There are only nine specialist anaesthetists in the whole country, they have problems with the availability of reliable drugs and monitoring equipment, at times they run out of oxygen and the power can be less than reliable.

“They have a lot of doctors and nurses and anaesthetists do an amazing job in the care they provide and I would like to specially acknowledge the enthusiasm and hard work of Dr Rachel Parva, the anaesthetic registrar from Port Moresby General Hospital, who worked closely with me during this visit.

“It is a privilege to work with such dedicated people and because PNG is our nearest neighbour with such close historical ties to Australia, we should train the specialists they require and provide the assistance that they need.”