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Australian Doctors International operations in Western Province, Papua New Guinea

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Papua New Guinea is Australia's closest neighbour which serves to accentuate the contrast in health between these nations. The epidemiology of Papua New Guinea is common to that of tropical developing nations. Malaria is hyperendemic with multiple resistant strains. Multi-drug resistant tuberculosis is widespread and inadequately controlled. Leprosy remains endemic. Cholera and diarrhoeal diseases remain major risks particularly for child health as many rural communities do not have safe and secure water supplies. Infant and maternal morbidity and mortality are among the highest in the world. As in much of the developing world, non-communicable diseases are becoming increasingly common due to the use of alcohol and tobacco. Life expectancy in Papua New Guinea is two decades less than in Australia; infant mortality ten times greater and maternal mortality thirty times that of Australia. World Health Organisation ranks Papua New Guinea as having the lowest health status in the Pacific region on the United Nation Human Development Index.

The Papua New Guinean population is overwhelmingly rural and remote, with 87 per cent of the population living in small, relatively isolated communities relying on limited agricultural industry. As in Australia and other nations, health and health care access is limited in rural and remote communities contributing to poor health outcomes. The challenging geography of Papua New Guinea, lack of transport infrastructure and a greater health workforce maldistribution contribute to greater access barriers than even in remote Australia.

Australian Doctors International (ADI) is an Australian not-for-profit organisation that provides outreach services to remote rural areas of Papua New Guinea. As a registered charity it functions with a great deal of volunteer good will along with support from the PNG Government, the Australian Government and corporate, philanthropic and public donors. It has base accreditation with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade receiving ANCP funds and is in the process of seeking full accreditation. This brings endorsement of ADI's approaches across a range of organisational dimensions and well as greater government financial support. The vision of ADI is a commitment to upholding the universal right to healthcare by working with local partners to provide and strengthen health services in rural and remote areas. Operations currently are based in New Ireland and in the Western Province, with scope of other Provinces in the pipeline.

The model of health care provided by ADI to address the access issues in these Provinces is to conduct remote health outreach patrols with a volunteer doctor working with local health staff jointly forming a patrol team to visit rural and remote health centres and aid posts. These health outreach patrols provide clinical care and public health education, and importantly also provide an

opportunity for health worker training and professional support. In-depth training is also provided for these remote local health workers building in practical hands on components in topics in requested subject areas. The model aims to provide services and build capacity of the health system of rural communities.

The Western Province of Papua New Guinea is the least resourced region of the nation. Recent years have been punctuated by political instability. The only connecting infrastructure is the Fly River that flows south from the central mountains of Papua New Guinea to the Coral Sea near Cape York. In this region ADI partners locally with Catholic Health Service and Horizon Oil, based from Kiunga upstream on the Fly River in the north of the Province. This is a port town for local produce and mining interests. It is serviced by a small provincial hospital with a busy maternity, surgical capability, in-patient and outpatient medical and infectious disease services, but with the relative isolation, medications become in short supply and connection to other health services are limited.

To support local services in 2018, ADI performed 22 outreach patrols to 14 health centres and 18 aid posts in remote areas, and performed an additional placements at Kiunga Government Hospital and Kiunga Urban Clinic. A total of 1,194 patients were treated by ADI volunteer doctors during the 93 days on patrol, and an additional 4,090 patients were treated and screened in partnership with the Catholic Health Service.

During patrols, 44 hours of public health education was also provided locally to the community and school children, and Health Service clinical environments offer the opportunity for case-based learning for local health staff and group learning after clinic hours.

The challenges for Australian Doctors International in Western Province are those of all organisations attempting to address the health needs of rural and remote communities, whether they be in developed or developing nations. A maldistribution of health care professionals is perhaps more acutely felt in Papua New Guinea than Australia, but the same difficulties exist in recruitment and retention for sufficient periods to generate continuity in care and engagement with and for the local health care providers. Regional community infrastructure is inadequate and contributing to the relative remoteness of the limited and aging health infrastructure these communities experience. A supportive service provided sporadically is not a service providing continuity of care.

The solutions being explored by Australian Doctors International in Western Province are as those being utilised in other rural and remote communities. Despite the contextual differences between rural Papua New Guinea and rural Australia, lessons in one context are valuable in the other. Local partnerships are essential to mobilise those investments in both community and health services to address health needs for the longer term. Coordination for efficient use of available services is essential. A focus on capacity building of local health professionals by those visiting, augments the value of those visits. Preventative and population health approaches are the next dimensions for Australian Doctors International to expand engagement with the remote communities of the upper Fly region of Western Province, Papua New Guinea. The resources, experiences and professionals of Australian rural health services are welcome to strengthen these efforts. The potential health dividends in Papua New Guinea are great.

Presenter

Klara Henderson started her career as a management consultant in strategy, IT and project management, before focusing on health issues for those in low- and middle-income countries. She has a PhD in health policy and economics on Timor Leste. Klara has worked with organisations such as WHO, the World Bank, Gavi, UNAIDS and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations on the front line in Ghana, Kenya, PNG, India and Thailand, and conducted health evaluations and authored numerous publications, including on access to health in low-resource settings. She has been a member of ADI's Program Committee since 2014, and the CEO since January 2018. Klara is also an adjunct lecturer at the University of Sydney, School of Public Health.