

OBITUARY

An agreement between friends: the contribution of Les Anderson to children of the Eastern Highlands

Leslie Earl Anderson died on 3 May 2002, aged 58, when the Cessna he was flying crashed on Mount Elimbari in the Eastern Highlands. Les was the Chief Pilot of Adventist Aviation in Papua New Guinea (PNG), and well known to the people of remote highlands villages. Les made a significant contribution to the health of children in remote parts of PNG, a contribution that may not be widely known, but one from which much can be learnt.

In January 1999 I met Les and Marylane Anderson at a barbeque in Kamaliki in Goroka. Les and I got talking about our work and travels. His life to that point had followed a road-less-travelled, and very quickly I saw much to admire about this man. He had spent 8 years as a missionary and director of a mission school and hospital in Ethiopia and had worked for years in the Yukon in northern Canada.

We talked about the health problems for children in remote parts of PNG. The lack of services and difficulties with access concerned him greatly and he asked what could be done. His depth of appreciation of the problems could only be gained by experience in trying to get in and out of remote villages on airstrips that resemble overgrown cricket pitches, or by dealing with the severe illness which develops in children who take many days to reach hospital. At the time, this discussion seemed particularly pertinent: since August 1998 the Eastern Highlands had been in the middle of a major measles epidemic that had killed scores of children and hospitalized 500. The conversation was not new for me; I had rehearsed it many times in the previous year with people of political influence or apparent wealth, hoping to attract some funding support for outreach services. However, unlike these previous conversations, Les showed a deep interest and understanding and his genuine willingness to help. Indeed it seemed to me that Les had this in his mind for some time and

brought as much expectation and hope to the discussion as I did. We discussed the possibility of flying vaccine clinics to remote parts of the Eastern Highlands where health centres had closed or were not functioning and where vaccines had not been delivered in a year or more. This excited us both, but willingness is not enough and funding is always a constraint. Les made a commitment to using his time and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) resources. And so came into being an agreement between friends that for 18 months bypassed the layers and obstacles of bureaucracy of health, politics and even SDA administration. He would provide the transport and I would gather our team of nurses and find the vaccines – simple.

Within 2 weeks the flying clinics took off. We first visited Maimafu where 200 people encircled the runway with their children waiting for vaccines, then Herowana, Kora, Megino, Obura Wonenara, Marawaka, and more. Thousands of children were immunized in the visits each Wednesday, and 2500 children were immunized during an additional intense daily flying vaccine campaign over two weeks in October 1999. Measles had been the major cause of child deaths at Goroka Hospital between May and September 1999, but after the mass campaign there were no measles cases or deaths reported in the Eastern Highlands throughout the whole of 2000-2001 (1).

The Flying Vaccine Program did more than eliminate measles in the Eastern Highlands. It provided the major interface between our department and remote communities. It taught clinical nurses the challenges of delivering health services to the most disadvantaged children. Several of our 22 postgraduate child health and midwifery nursing students from 1999 and 2000 spent six weeks working in health centres in inaccessible parts of the Eastern Highlands and this built strong relationships between the Paediatric Department and the people it serves. More

than this, our nurses experienced success rare in the highlands and learnt what can happen when people commit to something worthwhile. They knew Les as a reliable, kind, compassionate and ever-cheerful man who was committed to service of people, to God and to his family above all else. They also knew him as the safest pilot in the highlands. I see the effect of their exposure to such examples of committed people reflected in their work today.

I was frequently embarrassed about my inability to provide funds for this work, but Les would reassure me that the flying clinics were an important part of his mission, and not to worry. We lobbied for financial support from local politicians and aid agencies, but words of commitment did not turn into kina. In June 2000 Les and I decided that an agreement between friends was not sustainable, as neither of us would be in Goroka forever. We tried to hand over the responsibility and opportunity for this project to official provincial health services, an NGO funding agency and SDA administration. Like so many projects in PNG the Flying Vaccine Program faltered. There were demands for money that could never be met by available resources and no agreement could be reached on individual responsibilities or ownership.

I tell this story because so often when people are gone, stories are forgotten or misrepresented. In the same week of Les' death I have learnt that measles has returned to Goroka. We should remember what Les

helped do in 1999 and try to implement innovative methods of mass immunization applicable to other geographically isolated regions where children do not have the benefit of access to quality health care. We should be grateful to Les that he defined his job to achieve the most effective outcomes for the people and learn from him that obstacles are there to be overcome, not used as an excuse for inaction.

Les was strongly supported by Marylane Anderson, a peerless woman of rare courage whose quiet contribution to PNG is marked as much by what she gave to other people, as it is by what she lost.

The PNG highlands are safer for children and the world is a better place because of Les Anderson.

Trevor Duke

(Formerly, Paediatrician Goroka Hospital)
Department of Paediatrics
University of Melbourne
Flemington Road
Parkville, Victoria 3052
Australia

REFERENCE

- 1 **Mgone JM, Mgone CS, Duke T, Frank D, Yeka W.** Control measures and the outcome of the measles epidemic of 1999 in the Eastern Highlands Province. *PNG Med J* 2000;43:91-97.