

Child health in Madang 1975-1982

In my 8 years working as a Specialist Medical Officer (SMO) in Child Health in Madang Province (1975-1982), I had many dealings with Professor John Biddulph and greatly admired him as a doctor, a teacher, a writer and a person. As an SMO my main roles were to care for sick children admitted to Madang Hospital and to teach child health to the Health Extension Officer (HEO) trainees. I was also involved in malaria research and in supporting rural health centres, regularly visiting Saidor, TepTep and Simbai.

At the beginning of those 8 years, I observed the Independence Celebrations and saw Papua New Guinea (PNG) emerge as a confident young nation with a sound economy and a commitment to improving conditions for all citizens.

We (Drs John and Narelle Stace, Roger 3 years and Sara 9 months) arrived in Madang from Sydney at New Year in 1975. Our third child Greg was born in Lae in 1976. Our children were warmly accepted into the lives of the other kids living in the hospital compound. They climbed trees, played soccer, swam, shared bikes and laughed a lot. As parents, we could not have dreamed of a more stimulating and loving environment for our children, who also got on well at the Madang International Primary School.

My main clinical responsibility was to supervise services to sick children admitted to Madang Hospital. Children were initially assessed by the nurses in the outpatient's section, who used the Standard Treatment Book to guide their decisions. Those requiring inpatient care were admitted to the 50-bed children's ward, where I saw them and usually prescribed therapy according to standard treatment.

Ward rounds were done twice daily, during which times all acutely ill patients were seen. We admitted about 1500 patients a year. Case fatality rates were low, and compared favourably with other regional hospitals in the country.

The nursing staff was excellent and I enjoyed working with them. Initially I was the sole child health doctor, but for 3 years Dr Stephen Oppenheimer worked part-time in the ward while he researched the benefits of iron supplementation in infants.

Health Extension Officer training

The College of Allied Health Sciences ran a 3-year training course for HEO trainees. The first and third years were taught in Madang. The second year was in Kainantu. During the third year of HEO training, it was standard practice for trainees to spend 4 weeks in the children's ward, where each was assigned patients to manage. The HEO trainees took histories, did physical examinations, ordered investigations, made diagnoses, prescribed medication according to standard treatment and followed the children's progress. They were closely supervised and revelled in this atmosphere of controlled clinical supervision in which they demonstrated increasing skills at practical procedures including intravenous insertions, lumbar punctures and 'cut-downs'.

I was fortunate to have very capable colleagues including Vitari Dauma and Peter Tutua, who were tutors in Child Health.

John Biddulph was very active in teaching the HEO trainees. Each year he came to Madang for 2 weeks to lecture the third-year students. He presented material in a very clear way and quickly developed a friendly relationship with everyone. All the trainees enjoyed his teaching program and no-one failed the final test.

John wrote the text, Child Health for Health Extension Officers and Nurses in PNG, of which I was privileged to be a co-author of the 1981 edition. He also pioneered the highly successful pocket book Standard Treatment of Common Illnesses of Children in PNG. It contained protocols for treating sick children, and new editions have been produced in a collaborative effort by many paediatricians. In developing the initial protocols, if there was uncertainty about best practice, further research

was done. Dr Frank Shann, for example, evaluated treatment protocols for pneumonia and meningitis. Another trial compared the efficacy of quinine administered intramuscularly versus intravenously for the treatment of cerebral malaria. The end result was a standard treatment book that reflected the best practice of PNG's paediatricians. This approach preceded, by a decade, the current worldwide interest in evidence-based medicine and promoted integrated care of sick children long before other developing countries adopted this idea.

I was involved in several modest research projects in malaria. The main long-term outcome of these projects was in providing an initial link between Madang and the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR), based in Goroka. Subsequently PNGIMR went on to create a multicentred

malaria research team that has achieved great success. The PNGIMR team at that time included Drs Peter Heywood, Helena Vrbova and Michael Alpers and my collaborator Sam Pariva.

The 8 years I worked in Madang stand as a highlight of my career. The experience left an indelible mark on my life. My children regard it as the 'golden era' of their childhood. I wish every success to the current health workers of PNG as they deliver services to their people, whom I will always consider to be my 'wantoks'.

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