PNGIMR, the only dedicated Institute to carry out HIV research

By Elishebah Musia

HIV affects the most productive age group, those between 15-49 years of age, and the vibrant labour force of our country, according to statistics presented during the World AIDS Day celebrations at the YC Hall Grounds on December 3 in Goroka.

The impact of HIV will lead to loss of talent and productivity.

Speaking at the event, Associate Professor Angela Kelly-Hanku, on behalf of the PNGIMR Director, Dr William Pomat stated: “We are the only dedicated Institute in PNG who undertakes HIV research on a daily basis.

Much of the data that was presented by the National AIDS Council (NAC) comes directly from the impressive work that my colleagues from the Sexual and Reproductive Health unit (SRHU) undertook,” said Assoc. Prof. Kelly-Hanku.

She explained that they collect numerical data, they count how many people there are, how many times they are using condoms, how many sexual partners they have and issues around stigma discrimination.

“For most of us who are HIV negative is very hard to imagine what it must feel like to be someone living with HIV. It’s important we understand what their lives mean to take treatment every day, and to face stigma discrimination from family and also what it means to sometimes be isolated and uncared for by the law that we have in this country,” she said.

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Hello and welcome to the 57th issue of the IMR News.

This edition of newsletter brings you stories of recent activities at PNGIMR.

As we head towards the end of a busy year for PNGIMR, I welcome the opportunity to inform staff of key achievements that we have focused our energy on. High among these are: building our staff capacity, celebrating 50th year of health and medical research and continuing to build partnerships locally and internationally.

Congratulations to the following staff for making the Institute, their families and themselves proud: Dr Livingstone Tavul and Dr Janet Gare; for successfully completing, defending and receiving their PhD's. Ms Agnes Mek completed her Masters, Mr Ben Toto, Mr Shadrach Jally and Benadine Kasian completed their Honors Degree and Ms Irene John completed her degree. Dr Angela Kelly and Dr Andrew Vallely were recognized by UNSW as Associate Professor and Professor respectively, for their outstanding work through IMR and Ms Celestine Aho became the inaugural winner of the Deborah Lehmann Research Award. These successes were celebrated as part of the 50th Anniversary colloquium for the Institute.

On behalf of the staff and management I congratulate you all once again!

To our PNG National scientists who have completed their studies and for those who are continuing their studies, do the best you can in your careers, and become leaders in your field so you can train the next generation of researchers.

In the spirit of team work, I sincerely thank all PNGIMR staff for standing together and working hand in hand to celebrate 50 years of knowledge that is improving health and well being of Papua New Guineans and the global citizens too.

Let us be proud of the past achievements, celebrate current achievements and learn from the challenges to build a better future. The next 50 years starts today and together we can.

William Pomat, Director
A one-day workshop organized by the Population Health and Demographic Unit (PHDU) was held at the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research’s (PNGIMRs) Sir Adolf Saweri Lecture Theatre on November 8, 2018.

The purpose of the Workshop was to disseminate new data on household socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the population living in the surveillance sites.

A program entitled ‘Strengthening National Capacity of the Health and Epidemiological Surveillance System in PNG, 2018-2022’ was developed by PNGIMR in 2017. Early this year, the PNG Government approved the program to be a part of the Medium Term Development Plan III 2018-2022 through the Department of National Planning and Monitoring.

“For the first time, the PNG Government decided to take ownership to fund the program this year 2018,” Population Health and Demography Head Unit, Dr Bang Pham said.

During the workshop, the PHDU staff presented key findings and recommendations based on the Comprehensive Health and Epidemiology Surveillance System (CHESS) program.

Eastern Highlands Provincial Education Advisor Mr Thomas Jonduo who attended the workshop stated that “this program is very interesting and I am glad I came, because I have learnt a lot from the different findings and so I will have to influence the education and administration boards to work along and support PNGIMR to improve people’s health and wellbeing.”

Kelly-Hanku: Remove discriminatory colonial laws

“IMR is committed to ensuring that we have evidence and a human rights base response to HIV in this country.

That means, we must remove discriminatory colonial laws, they are not our laws, they are colonial laws from Britain,” said Assoc. Prof. Kelly-Hanku.

She made assurance that the PNGIMR will stand by the National HIV response until the government has all the data it needs and that the voices of the voiceless are heard.

“And until that day, when we can stand proud and strong and everyone is free to be who they are and to be safe from infection, the IMR will stand especially with the Eastern Highlands Provincial government,” she concluded.
This is indeed another outstanding achievement for the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) in reflecting years of hard work and dedication and for the recognition it also brings to the Institution.

One of Papua New Guinea’s (PNGs) only Institute that deals with people’s health in the field of finding out diseases and ways to deal with these diseases.

The former Head of Clinical Research in the Sexual Health and Reproductive Unit (SHRU) and Principal Investigator (PI) on many important studies, Andrew Vallely, has just been appointed as a Professor in Medicine at the Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney.

PNGIMR is flying in colours as medical research continues to provide evidence for better health through dedicated individuals like Prof. Vallely. In every battle won, another commences, thus making the role of the Institution endless and putting a spotlight on researchers and scientists every year.

Dr William Pomat was appointed as an Adjunct Professor earlier this year by the Kirby Institute UNSW and also by the Australian Institute of Tropical Health and Medicine, James Cook University (JCU), Dr Angela Kelly-Hanku was appointed as an Associate Professor by the Kirby Institute UNSW and now Dr Andrew Vallely.

The Institute will continue to conduct research and chase its overall goal - to improve the health and well-being of Papua New Guineans through quality medical research in partnership with national and international institutions.
The World AIDS Day was celebrated in Eastern Highlands Province on December 3 at the Goroka Catholic’s YC Hall ground.

Participants who took part were – the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR), Marie Stoppes, Save the Children, Red Cross, Mercy Works, Susu Mamas, Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority’s (EHPHAs) Michael Alpers VCT Clinic, St Joseph VCT Clinic, Kapul Champions, Mini Vava and Friends of Frangipani.

National AIDS Council presents Statistics on HIV/AIDS

By Elishebah Musia

Get tested, know your status, get treated, PNG together we are stronger than HIV and AIDS’ was the theme for the World AIDS Day celebrated in Goroka, EHP.

As stated by the Director of the National AIDS Council Secretariat, Dr Nick Dala, the theme reflects the work that needs collaborative efforts by all of those involved in the fight to eradicate HIV in PNG by 2030. The keynote address was presented by Benjamin Haindapa, representing the National AIDS Council’s (NAC) Director.

“We need to do more testing especially testing those who have been exposed to the virus through their careless risky behaviour. It is wise for us to get tested and know our status and be on treatment so that those living with HIV do not spread the disease and affect others,” he said.

The world now knows that ART is also one of the most powerful prevention methods apart from the usage of condoms. That is why more testing should be done to get PLHIV to go on treatment and have their viral load suppressed.

He added that “According to the statistics, as of 2017, there are 48,000 people living with HIV (PLHIV), and of those 48,000 only 34,600 know their status and the remaining do not know their status and could possibly be spreading HIV as we speak. Of these 48,000 only 26,393 are on antiretroviral (ART) and of those on ART only 419 of them have their viral load suppressed by ART.”

Dr Dala said the National AIDS Council Secretariat has developed the new STI and HIV strategy 2018-2022 and have completed the roll-out of this strategy in three regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) – the Highlands, New Guinea Islands and Southern region. Momase region will be completed later in Madang.

He concluded by saying “I am confident that we can truly eradicate HIV if we focus and prioritize our strategies in prevention activities that change the mindset and behaviour of those who are at risk and are very vulnerable.”
Supported by the Wesfarmers Centre of Vaccines and Infectious Diseases, the Award is designed to provide training and development for early career researchers in the Western Pacific Region who are investigating infectious diseases in children.

Celestine’s successful project is titled: ‘Prevalence and aetiology of otitis media in Papua New Guinean (PNG) children attending out-patient clinics in the Eastern Highlands’, and aims to determine the true burden of ear infections amongst different age groups and the cause of these infections.

Celestine is currently working at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, and her passion for research around otitis media stems from her own childhood growing up in PNG.

“My little brother had bilateral hearing loss as a consequence of recurring ear infections as a baby, and this caused him to struggle with learning – my parents would often ask to keep him seated at the front of the classroom so he could hear the teacher,” said Celestine.

She added that her family knew little about the effects of otitis media on hearing as it was considered a normal part of growing up, and they did not have education around ear health issues or awareness of audiology support services.

“As part of my research, I hope to bring emphasis on the awareness of otitis media in the community and in primary health care,” she said.

Celestine will be formally announced as the winner of the Deborah Lehmann Research Award winner at the Wesfarmers Centre of Vaccines and Infectious Diseases sundowners’ event on 6 March, 2019.
Nine Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) Goroka-based drivers and five support staff were given certificates on 16 November, 2018 after completing a three-day first aid training course which was conducted in October.

The First Aid & Emergency Care training organized by the Institute’s Training Unit was facilitated by Safety and First Aid Services Limited who is also a partner with the Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority.

According to PNGIMR Senior Training Officer, John Yogiyo, the training was organized for the drivers to aid them in their line of duty where they are often on the road and out in the field.

“The purpose of the training is to help participants help themselves by acquiring life support skills and knowledge to attend and provide initial response when faced with an accident or health emergency,” said Mr Yogiyo.

He added, “not only that but also to be responsible for one’s own health and safety and also become advocates to other staff, family and community members.”

Furthermore, Mr Yogiyo said the training was facilitated by a certified first aid professional and the content was simplified and delivered in accordance to the level of understanding as well as the needs of the drivers.

“Participants have been made aware of the safety issues surrounding their working environment and are now able to provide initial response in the case of an accident or faced with a health emergency,” he said.

One of the workers, Moses Dukuno, who presented the certificates on behalf of the facilitator said that to run first aid training is very expensive in terms of fee charges; however as a small organization, their mission is to carry out this first aid message across to all the safety and first aid officers to know and understand the basics of first aid.

Meanwhile PNGIMR Human Resource Manager, Tobby Apa, thanked the organization for delivering this training to the drivers.

“Some of you may have knowledge about this training, but see it as refresher training,” Mr Apa said.

On behalf of the Director, Mr Apa thanked the facilitators for allowing the training to occur and congratulated the participants for receiving certificates to certify that the training was successfully conducted, facilitated and completed.
Even though Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been at the forefront of applied malaria research (one of the first trials with insecticide-treated mosquito nets was conducted by the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research), for a long time, there was insufficient investment in a large scale control program.

This changed in 2004, when the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis (TB) and Malaria decided to support PNG in the country’s efforts to reduce malaria.

The funding from the Global Fund was used to measure how the malaria interventions affected malaria across the country. The PNGIMR has been a key partner in the renewed malaria control efforts, being responsible for the overall evaluation of the malaria control program since 2008.

According to one of the Principal Investigator, epidemiologist Dr Manuel Hetzel, the results of the first three surveys conducted in 2008-2009, 2010-2011 and 2013-2014 were published in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization (WHO).

“The purpose was to demonstrate how coverage with malaria interventions changed over time and to what degree this has affected malaria across PNG,” he said.

He added that for the surveys, field teams travelled to 218 villages across all of PNG, interviewed household members and collected finger-prick blood samples. The microscopists in Goroka and Madang then examined over 25,000 blood samples collected from the villages.

“In short, we found that the repeated free distribution of long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLIN) led to a substantial increase in net use across the country but that about half of the population still do not use mosquito nets,” said Dr Hetzel.

From the PNGIMR’s point of view, Dr Hetzel stated that the publication published online in September 2017 showcased a major country-wide engagement of the Institute in applied malaria research and evaluation that directly informs the National Department of Health and other partners in the fight against malaria.

“The historical achievement of the PNG National Malaria Control Program, that is the reduction of malaria prevalence to less than 1% by 2013-2014, has suffered a major setback in the last three years. Results from this and other surveys conducted by PNGIMR suggest that, in general, intervention coverage has plateaued at best.”

“Our surveys are now the important key source of information on changing and informing trends in malaria across the country and the PNG Institute of Medical Research has shown that it can implement large scale field surveys across all of PNG,” he said.
Every year, more than 921,000 children die somewhere in the world. In PNG, about 1 in 5 children die of pneumonia each year. The PNGIMR and the Department of Health (DoH) have been working together to reduce the burden of pneumonia using many vaccination with pneumococcal vaccines.

The IMR has been working on different doses including a booster dose of polysaccharide vaccine at 9 months to protect children against serotypes not included in the conjugate vaccine. An important risk for getting sick with pneumonia is having runny nose, where the bacterial pneumococcus likes to live.

The Infection & Immunity Unit of PNGIMR received financial support from 2011-2016 from the PNG Government, PNG LNG Liquefied Gas Project and the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council for pneumonia-related research activities.

Pneumonia is the most common reason for hospitalization and death in PNG children. Streptococcus pneumoniae (pneumococcus) is the most common bacteria causing severe pneumonia.

According to Project Manager Wendy Kirarock, there are more than 90 different serotypes of pneumococcus but only a proportion of these commonly cause disease. “10-valent pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (10vPCV) covers 10 serotypes and 13-valent pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (13vPCV) the same serotypes as 10vPCV with three additional serotypes,” said Ms Kirarock.

She said in collaboration with the Telethon Kids Institute and the University of Western Australia they conducted a study to find out if the pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCV) 10vPCV and 13Vpcv were safe and provided good immunity to prevent pneumococcal disease when given at 1, 2 and 3 months of age as part of the routine immunization schedule used in PNG.

“This schedule starts at a younger age and has a shorter interval between doses than the schedule generally used in third world settings,” she said. “We also aimed to find out whether a booster of pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPV) given at 9 months of age was safe and improved immune response. Furthermore, PNG infants carry many different pneumococcal serotypes in the nose within the first few weeks or months of life and we aimed to find out what impact these vaccines have on carriage of bacteria.”

The target population was determined to be healthy infants aged 28-35 days and residents of Goroka town, Eastern Highlands Province (EHP), or surrounding villages within an hour’s drive from the town.

She concluded that with the excellent rapport of PNGIMR staff and the community, enrolment of children was completed in March 2014 with all follow-up visits in 2016. In 2014, 13vPCV was added to the routine national immunization schedule in PNG but was not introduced in EHP till late 2015.

“All participation was voluntary with informed and written consent obtained from the children’s guardians. Recruitment took place at PNGIMR, Goroka Antenatal clinic, the Labour Ward of Eastern Highlands Provincial Hospital (EHPH) and in villages.”


Full name: Maria Ak Gipis

Home Province: Jiwaka

Title/Designation: Office Manager/acting Finance Manager

Branch: Goroka

Started off as: Project Accountant

Started off in what year: 12th September 2011

Number of years working with PNGIMR: 7 years

What do you love about PNGIMR? Friendly working environment

Share one experience that you will never forget about PNGIMR:
Practiced really hard to catch up with steps of the West Papuan dance to celebrate PNGIMR 50th Anniversary

Inspiration/role model(s): Dr.Bang Pham

Greatest fear: You never know what will happen tomorrow

Favourite quote: Keep striving, only the sky is the limit
During the closing up party for the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) Goroka staff, the IMR also farewelled two staff - Junie Menao and Morris Sinivei.

Mr Menao started work on July 26, 2010 with the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) in Goroka as the Buildings officer for eight years until the date of his retrenchment.

He thanked the Institution for employing him and giving him this opportunity of sharing his knowledge with the staff in the Buildings department.

“I just want to say thank you for this great opportunity in working with this Institution. I am honoured and grateful for being part of this family and will be leaving now as all things still come to an end,” Mr Menao said.

He thanked the staff for being part of his life and encouraged them to keep striving to excel in whatever they are doing for the good of this Institution and the betterment of this country as a whole.

The PNGIMR’s Internal Audit, Morris Sinivei has left the Institute. It is a sad occasion when a staff has to leave but at the same time it is good for his/her personal development and career path in facing bigger and better things.

During Mr Sinivei’s farewell tea party, the PNGIMR Director, Dr William Pomat, expressed gratitude to Mr Sinivei for being part of the Institution.

“Thank you Morris for the seven years that you have worked with the IMR in making sure that our accounts has been doing things the right way – we have not been overspending, thus following processes and procedures,” said Dr Pomat.

Meanwhile, Mr Sinivei thanked the IMR for showing appreciation and for releasing him with great confidence gained, more knowledge learnt and being able to be independent.

“I am moving from an internationally recognized Institution to a locally recognized Institution and I will practice everything I have learnt from PNGIMR. IMR will always have a special place in my heart,” he said.