



## Remembering the missing five

"...Despite this tragedy 6 years, on we still believe in the work we do to improve the health of Papua New Guineans..In respect to their memory we find courage to reverently continue our duties to the people of Papua New Guinea (PNG)..."



**By Alessandra Mel**

August 2017 marked the 6th anniversary of the five IMR research scientists who tragically went missing while working in the field in West New Britain Province.

Gibson Gideon, Leonard Vavana, Tania Oakiva, George Dogoya and Lydia Petrus were part of a National Malaria Research Project (MalCon) to evaluate malaria intervention which included malaria drug efficacy and mosquito bed-net coverage in Papua New Guinea. Today, their colleagues continue on despite the challenges associated with this kind of work.

In remembrance of the missing five the management and staff of the PNG Institute of Medical Research in Goroka gathered in front of the memorial plaque set up in their memory to show comradeship, respect and that they were not

forgotten. This is done to reaffirm their commitment to continue important and life saving work in medical and health research.

In commemoration of their missing colleagues the Mal Con unit stated: "That despite this tragedy 6 years, on we still believe in the work we do to improve the health of Papua New Guineans.

In respect to their memory we find courage to reverently continue our duties to the people of Papua New Guinea (PNG)."

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. John 14:27*

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# Director's Message

**Hello and welcome to the 53rd issue of the IMR Nuis.**

This newsletter brings you stories of the research work at PNGIMR. I am pleased to introduce Mr Douglas Diave and Ms Alessandra Mel who joined our IMR family to bring this newsletter to you.

The year is progressing well, despite the challenges and we are heading in the right direction. As we move forward I would like to encourage everyone to think about three words – communication, motivation and responsibility. Communication is a vital aspect towards supporting motivation amongst our staff to promote ownership and responsibility while carrying out our duties.

2017 has provided some highlights. On behalf of staff and management I congratulate two of the Institute's staff who have received their PhDs - Dr Livingstone Tavul and Dr Janet Gare (the first national female). We thank our former Director Professor Peter Siba for believing in capacity building. This has opened the way for the PNGIMR staff to pursue further studies in health and medical research within PNG and abroad.

To our PNG National scientists who have completed their studies and for those who are still doing their studies. I encourage you all to strive for the best in your careers, and to be leaders in the field of medical and health research in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

We have a good management team in place that is ensuring the Institute functions normally. The Council is yet to appoint a permanent Director and the Deputy Director of CASS and management to appoint an HR Manager but this is being worked on.

In the spirit of team work I would like to encourage the PNGIMR staff to stand together and work towards organizing a successful 50th Anniversary celebration for the Institute in August 2018. Since 1968 this Institute has been a pioneer in the field of research so as to improve the health status of Papua New Guineans.

As we work towards celebrating our 50th Anniversary let us look forward and ask ourselves what the PNGIMR can become 50 years from now. That dream starts today in all that we do together as staff of the PNGIMR.

William Pomat, Acting Director



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# PNGIMR farewells Mr Samson Akunaii

**"The institute's work was internationally recognised and having to acquired invaluable experience under the mentorship of a great line of directors of the Institute was something he was proud of."**

The Institute recently farewelled Mr Samson Akunaii, Deputy Director of Corporate Affairs and Support from 2010 - 2017. Mr Akunaii joined the Institute in April 1989 and brought strong management skills and attributes based on his years of experience both in the private and public sector.

During his tenure with the Institute he developed a broader understanding of the role of a research institution and its core business.

Speaking at the farewell reception for Samson Akunaii, Acting Director of PNGIMR, Dr William Pomat, said Samson was part of the key administration and financial team of PNGIMR that made sure ground breaking health research; on kuru, maternal and child health, malaria, pneumonia and other infectious diseases achieve their outcome without unnecessary administrative or financial delays.

Pomat stated that over the years the Institute has faced financial challenges that Samson navigated skilfully for the IMR to continue to survive.

He said he was confident that Samson had gained the necessary experience to take on his new role as the Acting Provincial Administrator for the Eastern Highlands Province given his experience and leadership abilities. Samson Akunaii thanked the Institute for the wealth of experience he acquired during his employment with it.

He said the Institute's work was internationally recognised and had acquired invaluable experience under the mentorship of a great line of directors of the Institute and this is something he is proud of. Samson said he thanked God for giving him the opportunity to serve the Institute and the people of Papua New Guinea.

He said with his new role now as the Acting Provincial Administrator of Eastern Highlands he was confident his wealth of experience will bring positive changes to the Eastern Highlands Provincial Government and people.

Samson Akunaii served the Institute for a total of 27 years. He has officially taken up his new post as the Acting Provincial Administrator for the Eastern Highlands Provincial Government.





# Vector Borne Disease Unit (VBDU) update

**"In Papua New Guinea the anopheline mosquito carries parasites that cause both lymphatic filariasis and malaria."**

Hidden away from the pristine coastline of beautiful Madang town is the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) Madang office currently based out at Yagaum. This office houses Vector Borne Diseases Unit (VBDU); with field sites in Maprik and Dreikir, East Sepik Province.



The unit focuses on malaria and lymphatic filariasis (LF) as well as a number of non-vector borne research programs particularly in collaboration with other PNGIMR units. The unit celebrated its 40th anniversary in August last year for leading malaria research in PNG and globally. The celebration was attended by over 200 participants locally and internationally; also discussed were the achievements and challenges to find a way forward for the unit. The VBDU continues to be a scientific powerhouse for PNGIMR.

Amongst several studies run from the unit recently the work done by PNGIMR VBDU staff both in Maprik and Madang on lymphatic filariasis has aided in changing world standard treatment. Papua New Guinea was one of the 4 sites (Indonesia, India, Haiti and PNG)

conducting this study to determine the safety of triple drug therapy before it became the new standard treatment for LF globally. The other 3 countries have also documented a similar safety profile for the triple-drug therapy.

Lymphatic filariasis, commonly known as elephantiasis, is present in 64 countries worldwide. This Neglected Tropical Disease, infection occurs when filarial parasites are transmitted to humans through mosquitoes. The infection is asymptomatic the parasites can live in a human body up to 3 to 8 years undetected. The elimination of LF is possible by stopping the spread of infection through preventative treatment.

In previous years the standard treatment for lymphatic filariasis was the two-drug treatment (diethylcarbamazine – DEC and albendazole – ALB) but despite its efficacy this treatment could not completely eliminate the disease. Now with the triple-drug treatment it has introduced the inclusion of ivermectin with DEC and ALB, this treatment's efficacy was thorough with eliminating the disease.

"PNGIMR work done by the VBDU staff in both Madang and Maprik have confirmed the safety of the change in treatment for LF", said Dr Laman. He also added that with the change in therapy the need for Mass Drug Administration (MDA) is necessary to address this NTD affecting Papua New Guineans.

Dr Laman gratefully expressed that, "It is a privilege to have the funder of this study Bill and Melinda Foundation agree to extend funding in order for the VBDU to continue over the next two years so that adequate follow-ups can be done over a two-three year period."

Dr Tavul gave recognition to a recent news article and said, "On a bigger scale the World Health Organization (WHO) has now approved the combination therapy to be adopted by the other 63 lymphatic filariasis endemic countries in their elimination efforts." He commended the work of PNGIMR - Maprik in pioneering the discovery of the triple-drug therapy to now alter the international standard treatment for LF.



The unit head Dr Moses Laman, succeeded Dr Leanne Robinson who departed for Australia, he is no stranger to this unit and possesses a wealth of experience and knowledge he contributes to VBDU. Also key sections under VBDU are the Molecular Parasitology lab, this is headed by Dr Livingstone Tavul and Entomology lab, and this is led by Dr Stephan Karl. Mr Andrew Raiko continues to manage the Madang site for VBDU.

In Maprik the scientific team is led by Ms Brooke Mancuso and Mr Phillip Lus, they have been instrumental in maintaining the lymphatic filariasis programs in the Sepik provinces. Mr Benson Kiniboro now oversees the upkeep of the Maprik site.

# Trilateral Malaria Project (TMP) staff developments

*Collaboration in research is effective in producing credible information and knowledge on issues in today's societies. Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) recognises and acknowledge collaboration to ensure quality research is done for the health and well-being of Papua New Guinea and its people.*

## PNGIMR staff visit Shanghai



The enthusiasm for travel along with an openness and willingness to learn are vital components when you are chosen to attend an event on behalf of the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR).

The Institute had the privilege of sending three staff from the Vector Borne Diseases Unit (VBDU) to attend two week training at the National Institute of Parasitic Diseases (NIPD) in Shanghai, China. Desmond Sui, Sharon Jamae and Diana Timbi were the team sent to learn about the methods and applications of spatial epidemiology.

Landing in Shanghai one can feel quite small in one of China's biggest and prosperous city. It was rather a different environment to experience and one that left quite a profound impression. The food, culture, people, lifestyle and climate all resonated with the hustle and bustle of this booming city.

However this did not distract the PNGIMR travellers, it encouraged them to learn and understand throughout the training at NIPD. "The great part of the exercises at the training was we were able to work with data from our own countries, making it easier to understand the training," said Diana Timbi.

Sharon Jamae and Desmond Sui added that as a team it was their honour to represent the Institute and learn about spatial epidemiology. They do hope to pass on the knowledge to their colleagues in order to improve research, data collection and analysis for tropical vector borne diseases in PNG.

They would like to thank all the principal investigators, NIPD and HIV Implementation Services Provider (HHISP) for making the trip and training possible.

## Molecular Diagnostics workshop

The Institute was invited to facilitate a molecular Biology workshop, focusing on building stakeholder capacity in molecular diagnostics.

The molecular diagnostic workshop, was held at PNGIMR headquarters in Goroka from 1st – 4th May. It was facilitated by PNGIMR's Senior Research fellows and Senior Scientific Officers.

The Workshop also involved guest presentation from the Walter Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Melbourne Australia.

The workshops involved a total of 19 participants and were from CPHL, NDoH, SMHS, UPNG and PNGIMR.

The workshop consisted of 4 full working days filled with lectures, exercises, laboratory sessions and a group case study. Participants were involved in presenting their case study (as a group) at the end of the workshop.

Presentations in the workshop covered Principles in Molecular Biology, Basic Molecular Biology techniques, Sequencing & online databases, application of Molecular Biology and Laboratory organization.

A Laboratory session on Molecular Biology techniques was also incorporated in the workshop program.

*The Trilateral Malaria project (TMP) is a partnership between Australia, China and PNG Governments: PNGIMR is a part of this collaborative research.*

# Visitors to PNGIMR - Goroka Office

*It is always an honor and privilege for the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) to have international and national dignitaries and collaborators visit the Institute. Such opportunities allow the Institute to showcase its research in the field of health and medical science. This is vital in providing up-to-date information on the work being done by PNGIMR and its staff.*

## U.S Ambassador visits PNGIMR Goroka



US Embassy dignitaries with PNGIMR Staff

This year 2017 began with a visit from the United States Ambassador to Papua New Guinea Ambassador Catherine Ebert-Gray to PNGIMR on the 9th of April. The Ambassador was accompanied by US Embassy/ Center for Disease Control (CDC) Samantha Harrykisson and the US Embassy Regional Security officer Justin Lester.

The purpose of their visit was to learn about the work done at PNGIMR and look at investments by U.S entities with research in Papua New Guinea.

The dignitaries were met by PNGIMR Acting Director Dr William Pomat and PNGIMR senior scientific staff.

Dr Pomat gave an interesting brief about PNGIMR scientific research ties with U.S institutions, he said, "The Institution has been collaborating with U.S institutions since the 1960s, PNGIMR appreciates that these ties still exist today to continue research."

Ambassador Ebert-Gray remarked how impressed she was with the high level of research and data that is being conducted by the Institute and its staff.

Currently the U.S Center for Disease Control and Prevention are funding two studies being implemented by PNGIMR: a HIV drug resistance study and the Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) study.

## Australian High Commissioner visits PNGIMR Goroka

It has been positive with PNGIMR having been visited by the Australian High Commissioner Mr Bruce Davis and the Secretary of the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Martin Parkinson.

Mr Davis said "their visit provided an opportunity for Dr Parkinson to meet with senior scientific staff and discuss IMR's partnership with Australian counterparts, its priorities, challenges and successes." Dr Parkinson directed questions towards each section head regarding the brief they presented on current research being done in the Institutes units.

PNGIMR Acting Director Dr William Pomat said, "Their visit was to assess the outcome of Australian investments with PNGIMR through funding for various scientific studies." He added that they were keen to recognise the Institute's affiliations with Australian institutions in how those relationships were facilitated to ensure research collaboration through the work done here and build research capacity of IMR and Australia.

The delegates were met by the Acting Director along with the scientific unit heads – Dr Moses Laman (Vector Borne Diseases Unit), Dr Rebecca Ford (Infection and Immunity Unit), Dr Bang Nguyen Pham (Partnership In Health Unit) and Dr Janet Gare (Sexual Health Reproductive Unit).



PNGIMR staff with Mr Bruce Davis and Dr Martin Parkinson



# Staff capacity building at the IMR

**At the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR), developing and upgrading the skills of our national staff to enable them to take on more senior roles is paramount to sustaining the research programs in the long run.**

## Staff short course skills training

Ms Debbie Kisa is a graduate scientific officer with the EEDU who recently attended Phase 1 of the Field Epidemiology Training program from 24th April to 5th May in Port Moresby.

Debbie was nominated by PNGIMR and accepted to undergo the six months Field Epidemiology Training program. This was funded by the World Health Organization (WHO) with additional support from National Department of Health (NDoH). The purpose of the training is developing human resource capacity for field epidemiology - surveillance and response to public health issues in Papua New Guinea.

Ms Marinjho Jonduo is one of the Institute's senior scientific officers in the EEDU. She has attended the International workshop on Laboratory Diagnosis for Zika, Chikungunya and Dengue viruses from 25th – 28th April in Taiwan, China.

The training was facilitated by the Taiwan Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in collaboration with the United States Centre for Disease Control (USCDC). The workshop hosted participants from forty different countries mostly from Asia and only three from the Pacific (Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea).

With the recent outbreak of Dengue and possibly Zika in PNG, the United States of America (USA) Embassy in PNG, through its CDC branch invited two participants ( one from CPHL and one from PNGIMR) to attend the workshop in Taiwan.

## PhDs

Dr Livingstone Tavul is one of PNGIMR's long serving staff. He graduated in July 2017, which is one of its kind through the UPNG SMHS.

His thesis was on *monitoring the efficacy of artemether-lumefantrine and dihydroartemisinin-piperaquine for the treatment of uncomplicated malaria in Papua New Guinea*.

Dr Janet Gare is one of the Institute's success stories. She is the first female national to receive her PhD award.

She graduated in May 2017; her thesis was on *antiretroviral therapy in Papua New Guinea: a study into biological and social factors contributing to treatment failure and drug resistance*.

Currently there are 7 staff members (5 female & 2 male) currently away overseas for their PhD studies.

## Masters

PNGIMR staffs also are able to receive their Masters degrees both locally and globally. Currently Mr Elvin Lufele a scientific officer with the VBDU in Madang is undergoing his studies with the UPNG SMHS for his Masters of Medical Science.

This now brings the total to seven who have undergone MMSc training at UPNG SMHS.

Henson Dima who is fetal immunity study project manager and project laboratory manager at Madang office, was the PNGIMR bid candidate for 2017 Australian Awards Scholarship. He was successful in his scholarship application and is now undergoing his Masters in Health Administration at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Also due to complete their masters this year are Rebecca Vinit and Agnes Mek who are at the end stage of their studies. There have been five PNGIMR staff since 2016 who have completed their Masters studies overseas and have returned.

## Honours & Diplomas

Also PNGIMR currently have 6 staff undertaking Honours/ Post Graduate Diploma in Studies.

Four students are enrolled at UPNG undertaking PGD in Science and for the first time, we have enrolled two staff undertaking Honours studies at the University of Goroka.

Three of the four UPNG students have completed all of their major internal assessment and now working on completing their final thesis writeup.

They all are expected to submit their thesis in September. For the two UoG Students, both have submitted their final thesis.

We also have three staff, which has been accepted for Post Graduate Diploma in Science Program at the UPNG. They will official commence in Semester two. The staff are Rebecca Narakobi (HIV/STI), Elma Nate (VBDU, Madang) & Daisy Mantila(VBDU, Madang).

# Gender equity and empowerment – Dr Janet Gare

Gender equity is a concept that promotes men and women to work together from the household to the workplace. In Papua New Guinea gender equity and empowerment are being supported and encouraged as a significant shift towards development in our country today.

The PNGIMR also believes in these social concepts and through the training committee has provided opportunities for staff to further develop their careers with studies. Dr Janet Gare recently successfully received her PhD in May 2017, making her the first female national to do so for the Institute.

“The institute is committed to staff capacity building and I proudly will say that the female staffs are leading the way in training. Currently, five of our female staff are undertaking their PhD studies and I believe more will be in the near future”, says Dr Gare.

It began for Dr Gare at a young age the aspiration and drives to be a rebel, to acknowledge opportunities



and strive for the best. Her role model was her biological father who was born and raised in the colonial period (pre-independence). He left his village (Safa, Bena) as a young boy of 13 years of age and walked all the way to Kainantu to get a proper education. He was one of the few who completed their education and graduated with a certificate to get a formal employment.

Acknowledging her biological father – Dr Gare said, “ His life story is full of hardships and sacrifices which motivated me to go extra further with education and obtain the highest degree to reward him of all his sacrifices. Without his sacrifices, I wouldn’t be who I am today. I have made my dad proud and I am happy

I did that.”

Now back at work Dr Gare still challenges herself as she stated that: “I am playing a more senior role and have bigger responsibilities than pre PhD era. My responsibilities have extended out of science to include unit administration, staff management, project management and endless field work consultation.”

Dr Gare is a keen supporter for staff to pursue further studies for their careers and says, “Anyone can do a PhD. If your heart is set to it, go get it. Nothing is impossible. But come back and serve the Institute and your country- make good use of your PhD.



## UOG students industrial training at PNGIMR

Three students from the University of Goroka, Mr Baffy Yunega, Ms Camilla Taso and Ms Catherine NiDung, have successfully completed training with PNGIMR.

Mr Yunega is a final year student currently doing his studies in Bachelor of Natural Science; majoring in biology and chemistry. He comes from Fincshaffen, Morobe Province. He was attached to the I&IU and EEDU during his six weeks of training.

Doing their final year in Bachelor of business accounting Ms Taso, a young Engan lass, and Ms NiDung, a bubbly young woman, from Morobe Province, were with the Accounts section for their 6 weeks of training.

This industrial training was part of their final year second semester assessment and it was required for them to complete their studies. They have expressed that they were able to experience and learn a great deal while working here at PNGIMR.

“It has been such a good experience for us to engage in the practical part of the theory we have been learning,” said Ms Taso and Ms NiDung



Mr Yunega stated: “It has been challenging to keep up with the pace but I have learnt so much during these 6 weeks with I&IU and EEDU.”

The students acknowledged the staff in I&IU, EEDU and Accounts for their time and support during their work experience. They are confident that with this experience they will be able to secure jobs in their respective fields after they complete their studies.



## Update from the PNGIMR 50th anniversary committee

With the 50th Anniversary of the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) less than a year away, the Committee is working tirelessly to ensure we can meet the requirements for the occasion. Dr Janet Gare and Mr Matthew Omena are the co-chairpersons of the 50th anniversary Committee.

Dr Gare encouraged the PNGIMR staff by saying, "This is a rare and historical event in the lifetime of the existence of PNGIMR and so with the event happening during your time of employment at the Institute it is special and historical."

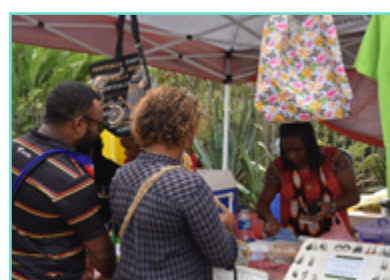
The planning is coming along very well. There are three sub committees in place, fundraising, scientific and media and IT - more committees will be formed as time progresses to ensure that the all aspects the celebration are covered.

Each committee has been given specific responsibilities to perform towards the overall planning for the anniversary celebration. The fundraising for the event kick started a month ago in Goroka, Madang and Maprik. We anticipate over 500 guests both local and international to attend the anniversary celebrations and we are aiming to raise half a million kina to cater for this important event.

The committee is also seeking support from outside sources to ensure our celebration of PNGIMR's 50th anniversary is a success. The committee has sent official letters out to our partners and our leaders for support. Our institute is a service organization and as such we are part of the community so we would like to appeal to the general public in the community to support our endeavours to make the 50th anniversary celebration a success.

To all staff the organizing committee thanks you for your cooperation and contributions towards this rare and special event. Finally we all must continue giving support to those organizing the 50 years anniversary and must celebrate the Institute's contribution towards medical research both nationally and internationally.

## Photos of staff in action - fundraising for PNGIMR's 50th Anniversary



# The 53rd Annual Medical Symposium 2017 - Port Moresby

"The theme for the Medical Society of Papua New Guinea fifty-third Annual Medical Symposium is "Access to safe and affordable surgery and anesthesia when needed". The event was held on 3-8 September in Port Moresby, National Capital District."

The Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) had the opportunity to have fourteen of its staff there to present at the symposium. Congratulations to the staff that were able to be present on behalf of the PNGIMR, the collaborators and funders.

Below is the list of papers and presenters that were a part of this annual scientific event for 2017:

## Madang

Prevalence of *CYP2D6* in Madang and its association with primaquine metabolism in children – Shadrach Jally  
Community randomized safety trial of triple-drug administration for lymphatic filariasis in Papua New Guinea – Leanne J. Robinson

Prevalence of *Wuchereria bancrofti* in *Anopheles* mosquitoes before and after a mass drug administration against lymphatic filariasis in Madang Province – Lincoln Timinao  
Understanding the highly dynamic nature of declining malaria transmission in Papua New Guinea – Leanne J. Robinson

## Port Moresby

Feasibility of molecular point of care HIV viral load testing amongst key population in Papua New Guinea: results from Port Moresby – Rebecca Narakobi

## Goroka

PNG pneumonia and meningitis etiology study of the impact of pneumococcal conjugate vaccine in hospitalized children with pneumonia and meningitis – Dr Rebecca Ford  
Population prevalence of HIV, hepatitis B virus, syphilis, *Chlamydia trachomatis* and *Neisseria gonorrhea* among female sex workers and men who have sex with men, Papua New Guinea – Josephine Gabuzzi

90-90-90 and the HIV continuum of care: how well are you doing – Martha Kupul

Access to and uptake of prevention of parent-to-child HIV transmission service among FSW in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea – Sophie Ase

Sexual and physical violence amongst female sex workers in Port Moresby – Ruthy Boli Neo

Tobacco consumption among men in Papua New Guinea: new evidence from the Integrated Health and Demographic Surveillance System – Noel Berry

Evaluation of p16/Ki-67 dual stain cytology for detection of HPV transformed squamous epithelial cells in self-collected vaginal specimen – Pamela Toliman

Knowledge of HIV prevention among adult males in rural PNG: new evidence from the Integrated Health and

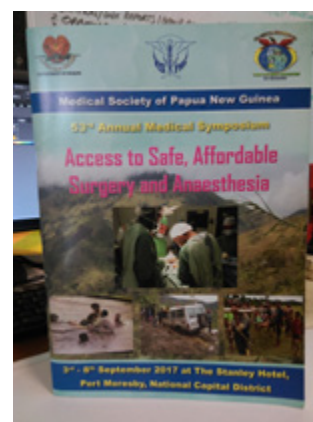
Demographic Surveillance System – Rebecca Emori

Point-of-care Xpert HPV test outperforms visual inspection with acetic acid, and a combination HPV/VIA algorithm, for the detection of high-grade cervical disease in Papua New Guinea – Pamela Toliman

Natural history of dengue transmission in Papua New Guinea: overview of research findings – Dagwin Suarkia

Domestic violence in Papua New Guinea: a comparison between females' and males' perspective – Nanim Ainui

Again congratulations to you all for representing PNGIMR as well as our collaborators and funders at the fifty-third Annual Medical Symposium.



## OUR LOCATION



**Head Office  
Goroka**

**Ph: +675 - 531 4200**

**Fax: +675 - 532 1998**