



Image: Sara Hudson

# 15 years on in Timor-Leste

**PROFESSOR GLENN GUEST**  
Program Director

After 400 years of Portuguese rule and 24 years of Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste finally gained independence in 2002. The withdrawal of the Indonesian military was destructive, leaving behind a disrupted and rattled healthcare system. The majority of the skilled workforce fled the country with medical equipment abandoned in a state of complete disrepair.

Since independence, the nation has rebuilt a comprehensive health service, from what was essentially a blank canvas. In the early 2000s, a RACS scoping mission found a medical workforce of only 20 Timorese doctors servicing an estimated population of 700,000. At the time, there were also no recognised postgraduate education institutions or universities.

*Over the years, 188 doctors have enrolled in one of RACS' postgraduate diplomas.*

Today, Timor-Leste is home to over 1.2 million people. Health outcomes remain poor with approximately 52.9 per cent of people living on or below the poverty line and one in 12 children dying before the age of five from poor neonatal health and preventable diseases.

The RACS Timor-Leste program, funded by Australian Aid began with just a surgeon and an anaesthetist, eagle eyed in their focus on the delivery of essential surgical care at the national hospital in the capital city of Dili. Visiting RACS surgical teams also regularly delivered services in the district hospitals, looking after families and communities who would have otherwise gone without access to life-saving procedures.

Between 2005 to 2011, some extraordinary Timorese doctors received scholarships for specialist training overseas. From 2012 until now the *Australia Timor-Leste Program of Assistance in Secondary Services (ATLASS II)* program provides in-country postgraduate training of junior doctors across a variety of clinical specialties, with the support of Timorese specialists who are lucky enough to have finally returned home from their intensive training abroad.

Today, Postgraduate Diplomas are available in Surgery, Anaesthesia, Paediatrics, Ophthalmology, Family Medicine, Internal Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynaecology and a Masters of Medicine in Paediatrics, all delivered from the National Hospital in partnership with the Ministry of Health of Timor-Leste and the National University. Over the years, 188 doctors have enrolled in one of the RACS' postgraduate diplomas.

RACS has worked closely with Timorese specialists to fine tune their skills as medical educators leading the national hospital to be an effective teaching hospital and a national university, positioned to deliver a bright future in postgraduate medical education.

In late May 2017, 26 doctors formally graduated from Timor-Leste's National University, pictured above.

The majority of these doctors will return to work in district hospitals and health centres across the country, where their skills and knowledge will be truly invaluable to their fellow Timorese.

In the 15 years since gaining independence, giant steps have been made towards a nationally-led healthcare service. The current generation of Timorese doctors are not only taking up the task of delivering clinical care under challenging conditions, but are involved in mentoring and teaching the next generation of Timorese doctors; every inch closer to the creation of a truly independent healthcare service – a far cry from the broken system found in the early 2000s. ▶



Images: Ellen Smith

## EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary (HPB) PhD Research Program (Liver and Pancreas)

The HPB Unit at Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney is offering two full-time positions for enrolment in the Doctor of Philosophy (Medicine) program at the University of Sydney commencing in 2018.

Candidates should be accredited as an RACS trainee SET 3 or above (up to and including new Fellows in the first two years following completion of their fellowship). They should demonstrate interest in research and an ability to work independently. Financial support is available for the first year with ample opportunities for additional income from surgical assisting. Candidates will be expected to apply for competitive grants and scholarships thereafter.

The Northern HPB Unit of the University of Sydney is made up of three consultants and has a full-time data manager. The unit has a strong academic track record including securing over \$421k in research funding over the last five years; supervision of two PhD candidates, three Masters of Surgery candidates & five MD research projects; and publication of 52 papers in peer reviewed journals. There are also large prospectively maintained liver and pancreatic clinico-pathological research databases. The unit has close affiliations with the Cancer Surgery and Metabolism Research Group and the Bill Walsh Cancer Research Foundation.

Research program opportunities include (but are not limited to):

### Liver:

- Investigating tumour-stroma interactions in colorectal liver metastases
- Investigating tumour-stroma interactions in HCC and/or cholangiocarcinoma
- Prognostic biomarkers in liver malignancies
- Pre-clinical modelling of liver malignancies
- Quality of life after resection of malignant liver tumours
- Impact of biological agents on outcome following resection of colorectal liver metastases

### Pancreas:

- Prognostic biomarkers in pancreatic cancer – IHC, proteomics, metabolomics
- Role of pancreatitis in adverse outcomes following pancreatic surgery
- Neo-adjuvant chemotherapy in resectable pancreatic cancer
- Nutrition and quality of life in pancreatic cancer
- Immune therapy in pancreatic cancer

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