

Treating and teaching in the Pacific Islands

The most important aspect is not just treating patients in need but transferring knowledge

A four person team of Paediatric surgical specialists from Auckland's Starship Children's Hospital visited the Solomon Islands under the College's AusAID funded Pacific Islands Project. In the days leading up to November 2009 the team's imminent arrival was broadcast on radio, so patients from the remote islands could make their way to Honiara for assessment and treatment.

While the staff of the National Referral Hospital in Honiara had already created a list of young patients to be treated by the team, other families, hearing of the visit, travelled for days to Honiara from distant islands in the hope that their children too could be seen by the visiting specialists. According to paediatric surgeon and team leader Mr Vipul Upadhyay all the children brought to the hospital were admitted and treated in turn.

"We found it fascinating that such a call went out and that people went to such great lengths to bring their children into the hospital for treatment. During the seven days of our visit in November we saw everyone who came to see us which meant we examined 40 – 50 children combining outpatients and inpatients and we operated on 13, treating children from as young as few weeks up to 15 years," he said.

Other members of the paediatric surgical team from New Zealand were Ian Chapman, anaesthetist, Ngaire Murray, theatre charge nurse, and Shonagh Dunning, post-operative charge nurse and assistant to Dr Chapman.

The objectives of the visit included conducting outpatients clinics, conducting surgery, transferring paediatric surgical skills to local general surgeons, providing training in paediatric anaesthesia and theatre nursing and post-operative recovery. Mr Upadhyay said that the majority of procedures carried out by the team involved treating urological and gastrointestinal disorders and conducting graft surgery. The local staff had specified what they wished to learn and the procedures they wished to observe.

"The visit was of great benefit because having people around who you normally work with as part of your team (at home) meant we could start work immediately without



Vipul Upadhyay and Rooney Jagilly a former Rowan Nicks scholar

needing to spend time getting to know each other," he said.

"From the day we arrived, we began with a ward round and a clinic, recruiting patients suitable for theatre and from Monday to Thursday we operated almost all day leaving Friday free for formal lectures to local staff and a debrief meeting with the hospital management and the AusAID post.

"We also made a point of combining interactive teaching with every surgery conducted over that week."

Mr Upadhyay said that while the National

Referral Hospital in Honiara had only limited facilities and equipment suitable for paediatric surgery, the Pacific Island Project Office had provided monitoring equipment and supplies. The team also brought some necessary consumables to support their work.

"Some of the cases allocated for our visit were difficult for the local staff to treat and indeed were challenging for us too. Some surgeries involved new techniques and procedures like free graft transfers and micro surgery with sutures as small as 7/0 which require the use of magnification devices," he said.

“Some of these procedures were unfamiliar to some of the local nurses but the surgeons of course were very knowledgeable with the concept of these techniques.”

Mr Upadhyay said that while all the surgeries were successful, the highlight of his visit was the great enthusiasm shown by local staff members to learn new techniques and gain new skills.

“The local staff members were extremely eager to learn and grasp everything we said and suggested. They are fantastic people and we built very good relationships and rapport. The local staff were not just passive observers - they told us what they wanted to know, to see, and we did our best to meet those aspirations,” he said.

“There was learning and teaching at all times during the stay. The formal lectures and teaching happened on Friday morning but even from our first day we made it a priority to provide a lot of interactive and hands on teaching.

“I helped local surgeon Rooney Jagjilly, a previous Rowan Nicks Scholar, undertake a procedure at one point and performed one-on-one teaching during the week. There was also a great deal of interactive teaching and learning between the nurses. Our anaesthetist also taught the local registrars on airway management and caudal anaesthesia and many other areas of interest for them.”

The Pacific Islands Project (PIP) is coordinated through the College to provide specialist surgical and medical services to 11 Pacific island nations with the specific aim of improving patient health through the delivery of tertiary health services. Funded through AusAid, the project sends specialty teams to the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Mr Upadhyay said that while no member of this New Zealand team had been to the Solomon Islands before, such was the success of the visit and the enthusiasm of local staff, plans were now in train for the team to return later this year.



The team: Shonagh Dunning, Ian Chapman, Vipul Upadhyay and Ngaire Murray



“The most important aspect of an aid program such as the Pacific Islands Project to me is not just treating patients in need but transferring knowledge,” he said.

“I have worked in areas in India that are in a comparable situation to the Solomon Islands so I appreciate the need in these countries. I like to contribute something towards helping the children who cannot come to New Zealand for

example, to a world-class tertiary health centre.

“I also think that if you transfer some surgical skills to the local surgeons at every opportunity presented, they will then be in a position to treat so many more patients so that for example, the children of such countries as the Solomon Islands will gradually be able to access all the contemporary treatment they may need.”