



From left to right: Penny Williams (Global Ambassador for Women and Girls), Bernie Ripoll MP (Federal Member for Oxley), Richard Marles, Dr Stephen Henningham (Australian High Commissioner), Dr Nitin Verma (Ophthalmologist), Julie Bishop, Teresa Gambaro MP (Federal Member for Brisbane) Front (left to right): Sib Verma (Optometrist), Dr Lucilla Ah Ching Sefo (Ophthalmologist-in-training)



The work from the eye team can change the lives of locals.

Eye care for Samoa

Essential eye care is being delivered with College help

The College is now in the process of assisting the Pacific Island nation of Samoa to develop and implement an eye care project similar to the extremely successful East Timor Eye Program.

With more than half the population in Samoa now considered obese and with the prevalence of diabetes estimated by the World Health Organisation to be as high as 23 per cent among the adult population, eye diseases such as diabetic retinopathy are becoming increasingly widespread.

Cataracts, estimated to affect up to 70 per cent of the older population, and refractive error along with diabetic retinopathy are now the main contributors to avoidable blindness in Samoa.

The proposed program, estimated to cost \$800,000 over five years, aims not

only to treat the vision impaired but, as in East Timor, also to train local eye care professionals, provide outreach services to the scattered population and support the continuing education of a local ophthalmologist.

The plan to establish such a program followed a December visit to Samoa by an ophthalmology team led by Dr Nitin Verma. Also part of the team was Dr Lucilla Ah-ching Sefo, a trainee ophthalmologist who is expected to finish her studies this year and return to Samoa.

During the week-long visit the team conducted 200 consultations and 106 operations, including cataract surgery and treatment for glaucoma while oculoplastics surgery, pterygiums as well as laser surgery was also performed.

Dr Verma said the number of patients presenting with bilateral cataracts was

an indication of the lack of ophthalmic services in the country.

“There were no specific presentation trends except all diseases seen were in an advanced stage and this indicated that screening programs are not in place and the outcomes of treatment are less favourable than if the disease had been detected and handled earlier,” he said.

“This is an issue not only of access to eye care but an issue of distance, given how scattered the population of Samoa is and people only come to the capital for treatment for cataracts, for instance, when their second eye is about to go.

“There are no local ophthalmologists in Samoa now and eye-care service delivery is dependent on visiting teams yet while we want this dependence on teams to stop, that cannot happen until we have an ophthalmologist on the ground.

“It is quite clear that there is a pressing need for ophthalmic services in Samoa and time is of the greatest essence as there are a large number of people going needlessly blind every day which can easily be prevented.”

Dr Verma said part of the College’s assistance to the people of Samoa had also been the on-going support provided in the training of Dr Lucilla to help her complete her Diploma in International Ophthalmology and her Masters in International Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney.

He said her return to Samoa following that training, would make an enormous difference to the eye care able to be provided.

Dr Verma met members of a visiting Australian parliamentary delegation while in Samoa and said he put the

proposal for the Samoan eye project to the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, the Honourable Richard Marles MP, who gave informal support to the plan.

In a report following the December visit, Dr Lucilla Ah-ching Sefo wrote of the great value provided, not only in the care of patients but also for the skills transfer provided.

“There are many valuable things that Samoa has gained from the visit,” she wrote.

“It has changed the quality of life of many of our people by removing their cataracts, pterygiums and altering the course of their diabetic retinopathy.

“(But) this visit is also a blessing to our staff as we often feel helpless that we do not have the skills to help our patients so these visits offer a service that is lacking in Samoa and greatly improves the

knowledge and practice of the local staff so that we are able to help our people.

“I am currently undergoing my Diploma in Ophthalmology and scheduled to finish by the end of 2012.

“At the moment there is no ophthalmologist for Samoa and I cannot express enough how great the need is for this specialist service and we would be grateful for any help we are able to receive.”

The team visit took place from 11 to 17 December at the Eye Clinic in Apia. Other team members were Dr Michael Haybittel, ophthalmologist, Ms Surabhi Verma, optometrist, Mrs Jennifer Hodder, nurse, Mrs Andrea Schuurmans, nurse, and volunteers Dr Shreya Verma, Dr Anu Verma, Mrs Jane Haybittel and Mr Derek Haybittel.

With Karen Murphy



AusAID has provided funding for the College's International Development work in the Pacific for more than a decade, with a current contribution of more than \$2.3 million from 2010-2012 and with more than \$8 million provided for the RACS' co-ordinated services in the region since 2007. The Honourable Richard Marles MP is the Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs. Late last year, during a visit to Samoa, he met members of a visiting Australian eye team. He talks to Surgical News about the trip and the role of the College and Australian surgeons in helping the people of the Pacific.

Hon Richard Marles MP, Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Islands Affairs



The Honourable Teresa Gambaro is the Federal Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for International Development. As a member of a Bipartisan Parliamentary Delegation, she travelled to Samoa late last year and met members of a visiting Australian eye team. She talks to Surgical News about the role of the college and the generosity of surgeons in helping our neighbours in the Pacific.

Hon MP, Federal Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for International Development



Was the timing of the trip to Samoa planned so that you could see the work done by the Australian eye team?

No, the timing was a happy coincidence. I was leading a bipartisan parliamentary visit to strengthen relations in the region and discuss gender issues. During our visit to Samoa we were fortunate to have the opportunity to see, first hand, the work of the visiting eye team.

How important do you believe such surgical team visits to be not only in treating the sick in countries without specialist surgical services but also in terms of Australia's role in the region?

Australia is a good neighbour and international citizen and this is one of the ways Australia demonstrates its commitment to improving health in the region. The specialists' visits complement the work the aid program is doing to save lives by helping Pacific governments improve the quality and coverage of health services. The visiting specialist programs are important initiatives that provide medical treatment and services where there are major gaps. It is a real challenge for health services to reach the small and highly dispersed populations that exist in many Pacific countries and the visiting surgeon programs are one of the ways that Australia is helping the region to meet this challenge.

Do you believe the role of the College in coordinating and staffing such visits will change in the future as some countries become more self-sufficient while others continue to need Australian surgical support?

Yes. AusAID is working with the RACS, the Fiji School of Medicine and others to assist Pacific Island countries to become more self-sufficient where that is feasible. AusAID is supporting the Fiji School of Medicine to improve the co-ordination of visiting specialist programs across the Pacific. As part of this the College is also doing vital work with the Fiji School of Medicine to improve coordination, identify opportunities for skills transfer with local counterparts and to support local capacity building. In East Timor, Australia is committed to providing specialist surgical and clinical services in line with the targets outlined

in the Government of East Timor's Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030.

What do you think of the surgeons who are willing to leave their practices to take time out to offer their skills to the people of the region?

All Australians can be proud of the work our health professionals are undertaking in the Pacific. Their patients and medical counterparts in the region, as well as the Pacific Island governments, are very grateful for the contribution of the visiting Australian surgeons and their teams.

How much AusAID money goes toward foreign medical assistance and is this likely to decrease within an environment of budgetary constraints?

In 2011-12, health will be the second largest sector in Australia's aid program. We expect to spend more than \$750 million on health assistance to developing countries, accounting for 17 per cent of Official Development Assistance. Of this, approximately \$177 million will be focussed on the Pacific, including Papua New Guinea. Under current projections, the amount of funding spent on health, including medical services, is likely to increase as we scale up the aid program to 2015.

What was the highlight of your trip to Samoa?



There were many, many highlights but one to mention was meeting a gentleman who had his sight restored after he received cataract surgery from the Australian ophthalmologists. He happened to be at the hospital for a check-up while I was visiting. He said the surgery had restored his sight and changed his life. I think it is fantastic that the assistance work we do as a nation can have such an immediate and overwhelming impact on someone's life.

What was the purpose of the visit to Samoa?

Becoming acquainted with the fine work being done by the Australian Ophthalmological team in Apia was a highlight of the visit I undertook to Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Tuvalu and Samoa. The visit to these countries reinforced my appreciation of the strength and depth of Australia's relations with our Pacific neighbours. Meetings with these nations' leaders and aid program personnel have strengthened my understanding of the value of continued Australian engagement in addressing the region's development challenges.

Did you meet members of the team and the patients they were treating?

On December 15, we visited the Australian Ophthalmology Specialist Team at the Tupua Tamasese Meaole Hospital. We met with patients and observed the work being done in the out-patients clinic. The dedication and expertise of the team is absolutely inspiring, not only are they restoring, but also saving the sight of their Samoan patients.

How important do you believe such surgical visits to be not only in treating the sick in countries without specialist surgical services but also in terms of Australia's role in the region?

The programs developing the medical knowledge and skills of Pacific Island health workers are vitally important. The generous contribution by Australian medical specialists is enabling our neighbouring nations in the Pacific to deliver a range of primary, secondary and tertiary health services to their populations. Clearly, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons' role and contribution is a critical and significant factor in improving the clinical health outcomes of people in Pacific Island countries and neighbouring nations. Since the visit, I have written to the Foreign Affairs Minister to reinforce my support for the work being undertaken in these Pacific nations, and requesting that consideration be given to increased funding being made available through AusAID in future budgets.

What do you think of the surgeons who are willing to leave their busy practices to take time out to offer their skills to the people of the region?

Australia is blessed to have among its citizens such selfless surgeons who are so generous in sharing their knowledge, skills and time for the benefit of others. The commitment of these surgeons has made such a profound and beneficial difference to so many people's lives, the majority of whom may never had the opportunity to access such advanced medical attention. We can't acknowledge and applaud these surgeons' work enough.

Would the Coalition foresee a time when a greater percentage of the AusAID money given to medical assistance might be spent more on bringing trainee surgeons to Australia for training rather than sending teams over to the country in need?

My view is that our approach should be a balance between the two options. I am hopeful that in the future additional places for medical specialist training will be made available in Australia as part of our foreign aid program. I believe that specialist training should also continue to occur in the countries of need. The flow-on effects of this on-site training are the secondary, but important benefits of the training of local support staff such as nurses.

What was the highlight of your visit to Samoa?

The highlight for me was the opportunity to observe and learn first-hand from the country's leaders about Samoa's progress and its Government's sustained commitment to development and reform including improved health services. The visit to Samoa allowed me to meet again with Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi who is the Pacific's longest serving leader. I was particularly impressed at how quickly and effectively Samoa has recovered from the September 2009 tsunami, with support from Australia and other donors. At the peak of the response, 108 Australian emergency and medical personnel were in action. They performed life saving work including 101 surgical operations, 171 field medical treatments, 1,061 emergency department presentations and 33 public health village assessments.