

VOSO in Bougainville 12 April-2 May 2009

BY KYLIE DREAVER*

At dawn on Easter Sunday the 2009 VOSO trip left Auckland for Papa New Guinea. My brief for the trip included packing a snorkel and mask, reef shoes, four books to read, comfort/ snack food and anti-malarials. This was sounding like my kind of volunteer trip. There was also a mention of some 'rascals' who had guns and knives and had destroyed a cellphone tower down south, so I was wondering how accurate the Vodafone website's statement of full coverage was.

The VOSO team which was lead by Dr David Murdoch and who was accompanied by his wife Dr Rosemary Murdoch (the team's own IOL master) were on their 9th consecutive trip to Bougainville. We were also joined by Dr David Pendergrast and his wife Lois, an ophthalmic nurse. The optometry role was mine.

Our first day of VOSO was adventure tourism at its best - a smoking volcano seen as we drove from the airport in Rabal to our accommodation. Adventure tourism

continued the following day as we experienced airport security at Rabal as we headed to Bougainville. Airport security involved the guard opening each bag and skirting their hand round the edges. This security was deemed necessary after grenades were found left on a plane from Bougainville. In the spirit of no news is good news none of us asked anymore about the matter.

We arrived safely in Bougainville and to Dr Murdoch's delight and relief all our parcels that had been sent ahead were waiting there for us at Buka Hospital. We were then loaded into 4 wheel drive ambulance or the back of a ute with all our boxes for the next 2 weeks of the trip. It took nearly five hours to travel the 176km journey to Arawa, crossing 16 rivers with only 2 operational bridges for our use. The speedometers were on zero the whole journey and the needle pointed to empty for the petrol tank.

We reached Arawa which has Bougainville's greatest consumption of beer and soft drinks - apparently abled by the NZ Police and VSA (Volunteer Services Abroad). Incidentally it was VSA that invited optometry to Bougainville a decade ago when the local teachers had become presbyopic and were unable to read the student's work and there was nowhere to get glasses.

In Arawa the team performed 22 operations mainly for light perception cataracts and prescribed hundreds of glasses for reading and at least a dozen for myopia. The highlight was the post-op lady crying for joy as she hadn't seen her husband's face for 15 years! The most memorable cases were the prosthetic eye of a cats eye shell, a young lady with a worm in her anterior chamber, an albino boy, and all the eye injuries. Eyes that were blinded by fists, coco pods, bamboo sticks and knives - a case in point was an 8 eight year old boy who lost his left eye at 2 years from an injury with

bamboo and last year nearly lost his right eye when he walked into a knife by chance. He has a trapped pupil and 6/9 vision. There were also some unusual cases of bilateral blindness with chorioretinal atrophy with cholesterol plaques.

The VOSO team was aided by Callen services, a Christian brothers organisation whose staff are paid by the government. These folks were invaluable and rather partial to the minties I had brought over. Initially Callan staff Paul Matau, Michael Oni and Hilder Kamera did the vision screening. It wasn't long before Lois got in on the act and using her pidgin was able to ask what is your name? 'name belong you?', how old are you 'How much Kristmas belong you?'

Lois, Rosemary and Paul hit the road to Wakanae for a day to hand out more glasses - mainly hobby glasses and sunglasses, see a local family of high myopes and recruit more cataract operation candidates.

Over the weekend we had a day trip to Pokpok Island for some snorkelling. A pokpok is a crocodile and fortunately the island is shaped like a crocodile rather than a habitat for them. We also saw our first relics of World War II, a Japanese plane, tank and gun.

We then journeyed south into 'rascal' country despite months of negotiation we still had to pay to get through the roadblock. We later learnt that the New Zealand High Commissioner had paid 4 times the team's fee and had a MK47 pointed at him. Then we embarked on eco-tourism with a visit to the copper mine at Pangouna which had desolated the area and ruined the local river.

In Buin we hired a generator and man to operate it so we could get the operating theatre functioning. Paul and Michael journeyed south with us as did Arawa Hospital's theatre nurse, Elizabeth Nawa. Elizabeth had a great way with words as proven by her sign over the broken theatre toilet - 'if you use this toilet please do not pis pis on the seat. If you miss, clean up the seat.'

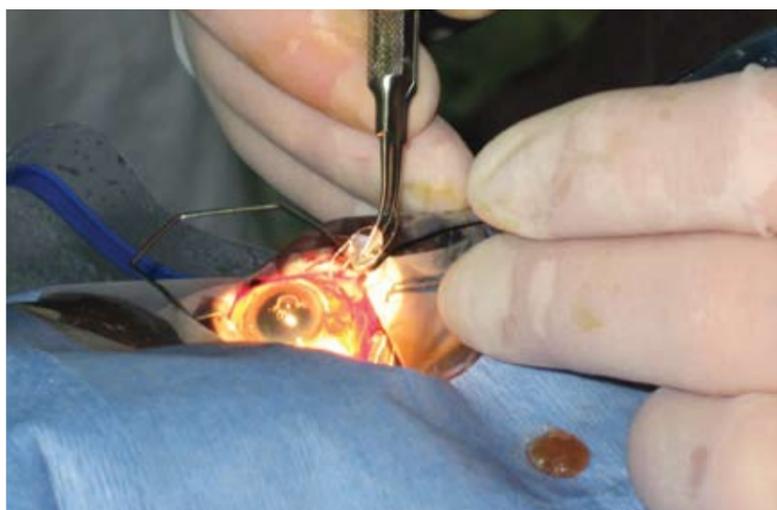
More than 200 glasses were given out in 2 days and 20 cataract operations were done. The interesting cases were a bilateral coloboma and a suspected case of



The albino boy and his mother



NZ VOSO team
Bk row Drivers Paul and Peter, Michael Oni, Dr David Murdoch, Dr David Pendergrast
front row Lois Pendergrast, Dr Rosemary Murdoch, Kylie Dreaver



Cataract surgery. Note the cataract that has been removed



Michael Oni getting swamped by eager patients as he tries to check vision



Cataract post operative patients, including "stop easy mama" waiting on the beds they slept in for the doctor



David Pendergrast sharing a special moment with his day one post-op patient



Kylie Dreaver sits next to her 'tools of trade'



A post-op patient crying for joy having not seen her husband's face in 15 years



Dr Rosie Murdoch and Dr David Pendergrast examinaing a lady with a corneal infection



The 8 year old boy with bilateral eye injuries

neurofibromatosa. Our pidgin was expanding to ophthalmic terms - cornea 'windscreen belong eye', retina - 'backside belong eye', cataract - 'smoke backside eye', optic nerve - 'rope belong backside eye'. Eyes with an RAPD were described as 'backside belong eye buggerrup'.

Then we headed to Monoitu, about fifteen minutes from a notorious rascal and with the loudest roosters of the trip. The most memorable cataract operation was Dr Murdoch operating in a room just bigger than a cupboard with the usual audience at the window. He was asking his wriggly patient to be still - "stop easy mama" - but he was fighting a tough battle as the bystanders were commenting on the operation. It's not easy to lie still when you are told a knife has sliced your eye open. Once the bystanders were shooed away, the operation resumed and was a success.

We made our way back to Buka via Tearouki where we saw 180 people and found 18 candidates for cataract surgery. The most notable were the men in their 20's and 30's with a mature cataract. In Buka about 50 operations were done and over 500 glasses handed out, including an aphakic pair. A few more custom pairs of glasses were prescribed but on the whole most people had very little astigmatism. I made Dr Pendergrast's morning when I found a small boy with herpes simplex keratitis and a 60 year old welder with a rumbling infection and a positive seidal sign. The most notable operation was Dr Murdoch's which had a half hour of darkness when the electricity cut-out, fortunately he managed 3 stitches under the light of Lois' torch. The most memorable cataract operation was for a man from Nissan, a five hour boat trip away, who after being blind since 2000 was eager to get home to see his 5 year old daughter. Our weekend in Buka, we went

fishing and snorkelling in the Buka Straight. We saw a huge variety of fish, blue starfish, crown of thorns, sea cucumbers and a japanese zero. We also celebrated ANZAC day with all the ex-pats in Buka. It was particularly special for me as my maternal grandfather was an Australian Commando that had fought in Papa New Guinea during WWII.

During this trip the Murdochs became grandparents for the first time and I thoroughly enjoyed collecting names for their bubu (grandchild). The best girls names were Gorothy, Dorcas and Mother Therese, and the best boys names were Belthazar, Ambrose and Aloysius.

This was a great VOSO trip - an escape from the cold to 30 degree temperatures day and night, over 100 surgeries that gave people the gift of sight, packed with 4 wheel drive adventure travel, eco-tourism, snorkelling, finishing and WWII history. So if you're interested in doing a VOSO trip, please contact Richard Johnson richardj@adhb.govt.nz

Our trip would not have been possible without all the hard work Dr David and Rosemary Murdoch do in organising travel, packaging glasses and supplies. Many thanks to them and Alcon for all their supplies for surgery and eyedrops, NZ Aid for funding, VOSO, the volunteers, Callan Services staff, all the different hospital staff who assisted us, Lions Papakura for collecting so many glasses, Wayne Wood at Read Prescriptions for all the prescribed glasses and for all the lenses glazed that made anisometric glasses symmetrical, VMD for the ready readers, Kevin Way of Ophthalmic Instrument Company for a vertometer and Medical Aid Abroad for a retinoscope both of these being given to Callan Services.

* Kylie Dreaver is an optometrist who practices at the Manukau SuperClinic and does locum work. This was her third VOSO trip.