

HOPE worldwide

UPDATE ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA JAN-MAR 2006

EXTENSIVE NEW WORK IN HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a looming catastrophe for Papua New Guinea. The disease has spread all over the country, and is indiscriminately killing adults and children. The exact extent of the problem is unknown as testing is only available in major health facilities - tens of thousands of Papua New Guineans are infected with HIV but are unaware, and thousands have died without diagnosis. The best current estimate is that 1.7% of adults are infected, and that this proportion is rising quickly. It is quite possible that PNG will develop the worst epidemic seen in the Asia-Pacific region, eclipsing the devastating impacts seen in Cambodia and Thailand. Whole family and tribal groups will be decimated, and many young educated men and women will perish in the prime of their lives. The economic impact alone is substantial – the disease will cut a swathe through the country's young educated professionals, and is starting to overwhelm the already strained and under-equipped health services. The personal and psychological toll will be enormous.

And yet there is now hope. Education activities by the Government and many groups, including ourselves, have raised awareness amongst many communities in PNG, promoting behaviour change and safe sex practices. Anti-retroviral treatment – which can stop the disease in its tracks and often bring a return to good health - is now being trialled in four locations around the country. Thankfully the disease has not acquired the degree of stigmatisation seen in some other countries.

We have been conducting large-scale HIV/AIDS community education for 10 years and school education for five years. Other HIV/AIDS work has been carried from our Nine Mile Urban Clinic in Port Moresby – including peer educator training and condom distribution. Two years ago we introduced Voluntary Counselling and Testing at the clinic. These efforts, and the high reputation of the Nine Mile clinic generally led Family Health International to approach us as one of their first three partners in PNG. FHI is a large USAID-funded agency which works in HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, and women and children's health in over 70 countries. The program is called “**Helivim Bilong Yumi**” – “**Our Help**”.



Children from Nine Mile with the Program's sign



Counselling at Nine Mile

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The program consists of a number of initiatives aimed to reduce HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in the Nine Mile area. These include: a) improving access to STI/HIV services and Voluntary Counselling and Testing for vulnerable women and men, sex workers, and People Living with HIV/AIDS – by improvement of STI diagnostic, counselling, treatment, and referral services, and b) promote behaviour change and increase safe sex practices amongst sex workers and other high-risk individuals by peer education, promotion of condom use, and other activities. New staff funded by the program include educators, counsellors, a doctor, and a laboratory technician. Numerous necessary pieces of equipment and supplies have been provided under the grant.

FHI have a number of distinctive strengths, including a strong emphasis on formal monitoring and evaluation, and a willingness to build capacity in the organisations that they partner with. We are very grateful for both these inputs as we learn to mount a program of this size and complexity.



HIV/AIDS peer educators from the Nine Mile community, trained by the Program, with Mrs Kaviani (back left), Dr. Temu (third from left, back row) and Dame Kidu (centre).



U.S. Ambassador Mr. Robert Fitts speaking at the Opening Ceremony

Activities commenced in October 2005, with the official launch on February 23rd. The ceremony was attended by the US Ambassador to PNG (the Hon. Robert Fitts), the PNG Minister for Lands and Minister assisting the Prime Minister on HIV/AIDS (Dr. Puka Temu), the Minister for Community Development Dame Carol Kidu, FHI Country Director Mrs. Nayer Kaviani, and others. It was especially significant to have Dr. Temu in attendance as, in a senior position in the Department of Health, he was instrumental in helping us to establish the Nine Mile Clinic in 1994.

Thank you for your support!