

Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project, Medical Tour 2 Ambae June 2009

Santo Airport on June 19 saw the arrival of Medical Team 2 to Luganville, ready to board the 53' sloop Chimere. The yacht was in Vanuatu as dedicated transport to take eye care and medical screening to people living in remote villages. In the case of Team 2, this was to the steep volcanic hills and rocky landings of the island of Ambae, the "Jewel of the South Pacific." An additional team had flown separately to Norsup to service the island of Malakeula.

Boat crew and medical team met for a shared meal in Luganville at the PWMU lodgings on the night of the team's arrival. A round-the-table introduction revealed a set of individuals with extraordinarily diverse experiences and extensive knowledge, from running a chicken shop, delivering yachts internationally, working in finance and the gaming industry, farming, IT, maintenance, teaching and various medical disciplines, to specialist eye care. Six Australian boat crew, six Australian medicos, three Ni-Vanuatu medicos and one further Ni-Van eye-care nurse we picked up on Ambae was a large team that Chimere was well-suited to carry. Australians, including optometrist Don Beaumont, GP Dr Tony Richards, nurses Isabel Purcell and Shirley Morrissy, Rotarian volunteer Leo Morrissy and assistant Mary Treasure joined Ni-Vanuatu eye care nurse practitioners Marie-Leah Tusai and Mary Tabi, optometry assistant Jessy Bihu and trainee nurse Rena Tari to bring their combined expertise to islanders who do not have ready access to medical care.

Travelling aboard a yacht was a new experience for a number of the medicos, but it made it possible to reach target areas that are inaccessible by any other means of transport. Our first stop was the village of Ndui Ndui where the team based itself for several days. Although we landed the medicos up the coast at Lune, the decision to sail down and anchor "Chimere" off the concrete pier at Ndui Ndui itself meant that the boat crew could help out more with tools and practical assistance at the clinic and schools. It also meant that the generator could be taken ashore for treating the locals to screenings of "Chicken Run" and "Finding Nemo."

A large community gathering for a historical re-enactment of the arrival of the first missionaries to the area at Walaha, a half hour away by truck, was too good an opportunity to let pass, so an impromptu clinic was held there to catch those attending the celebrations.



Over the next three days the eye clinic was centered at Ndui Ndui medical centre, with team members visiting the local schools to test the children and staff. Boat crew Martin Purcell took tools from the boat and tackled the task of restoring the battery bank used for solar power storage and repairing some of the antiquated hospital equipment.



Eye testing teacher and students at Ndui Ndui

From Ndui Ndui it was a short sail up the coast to Vingalato, where the mountains drop precipitously into the sea. The only sign of life was a satellite dish nestled in the jungle foliage. A lone outrigger occupant confirmed that we were in fact at the right spot, and by the time the dinghy reached the steep rocks a few villagers had appeared to form a human chain to help unload gear and people. Everything was carted up a steep jungle path to the school, the clinic's base for the next couple of days. A further clinic was conducted on the steep mountainside an hour's walk away the following day, with people walking from the other side of the island to attend.

The next hop on Chimere was up the coast to Waloriki, where the wide expanse of sand appeared as though it would be an easier landing than than the previous one. Locals waved us up to the far end of the beach to avoid the worst of the strong undertow, and once more the dinghy had to be held off submerged rocks as the human chain unloaded and carted boxes and bags across the hot sand and up a steep jungle path to the village. A day off for church and rest was followed by two days of clinics. The team split up to service two further villages accessed by foot.



Jessy Bihu sharing her sunnies



Nurses' hut at Fandue

Then it was back to the boat and on to Lolowai, where Mary Tabi lives and works. Mary and her husband generously fed the team at their restaurant every evening during the stay. Using Lolowai as a base, the team travelled by truck (local bus) to cover the villages of Lolovange and the large French school at Volopuipui.



A trip to Ambanga over the roughest terrain the team has ever experienced included a stop at Nagola Primary School, where there was an outbreak of yaws affecting all of the children. Yaws is an infection characterised by open sores, which if left untreated can eventually eat into the bones. It can be treated simply with penicillin, but because it is highly contagious everyone needs to be treated at the same time. A recommendation to treat the outbreak was left with the education authorities and the Health Department.

Hats and sunglasses were kept aside to distribute to the surprisingly high number of people whose eyes and skin are particularly at risk of sun damage due to albinism.

Leaving Mary Tabi behind to continue the work at Lolowai, Chimere set off on Thursday July 2nd to return the team to Luganville. The tour was rounded off with a Friday clinic at Lingan Village and a visit to Luganville hospital by Dr Tony and neonatal nurse Isabel to assess a baby with cleft palate and provide it with a special teat to enable it to suck.



All together MSM medical team 2 to Ambae saw 954 patients. Glasses were dispensed to 459 people, there were 30 specialist referrals made, and recommendations made to the Health and Education Departments with respect to treating yaws.

It was a privilege to serve the people of Vanuatu. They have much to teach us about hospitality, generosity, dignity and the richness of simplicity. Despite being materially impoverished compared with our own country, in stark contrast with the ethos of economic rationalism, they retain and shared with us a wealth that feeds and sustains the human spirit.

Thanks to the medical team and the boat crew for working together so spectacularly well to accomplish the task they set out to do. Thanks to the Uniting Church and Rotary for putting compassion, charity and healing into concrete practice, and thanks to the Latimers for committing a substantial proportion of their personal resources into providing Chimere for this ministry.



Medical team L to R: Rena Tari, Mary Treasure, Shirley Morrissy, Tony Richards, Isabel Purcell, Marie-Leah Tusai, Don Beaumont, Leo Morrissy. Absent: Mary Tabi



Boat crew L to R: Jim Carpenter, Bob Brenac, Ann Shoebridge, Tony Owens, Martin Purcell, Jenny Thompson