Visionaries set sail to help islanders

Volunteers on a mission to help restore sight

By KATE DENNEHY

WHEN Carl Suddaby and his wife Linda visited Vanuatu in the South Pacific last year to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary they fell in love with the people.

So when the chance came to join a sailing mission to help the indigenous Ni-Vans with eye and other health problems, Mr Suddaby jumped at it.

He will fly to Vanuatu's capital Port Vila next month to join a revolving group of 19 volunteers including doctors, nurses, a dentist and an optometrist for a month-long stint to dispense free healthcare.

Sight for sore eyes ... blindness is just the tip of the iceberg – Medical Sailing Ministries volunteers help people with a range of health problems; (inset) Robert Latimer gets to know a resident.

The volunteers will sail to far-flung islands accessible only by boat to help with a range of problems – from basic to serious. "I could see the need to help them to learn how to help themselves and I've been looking for ways to go back and do just that," he said. He read about the project in a boating magazine and contacted another Australian, financial adviser Robert Latimer, to offer his services.

Mr Suddaby, a diesel mechanic who manages a boat-repair business at Hervey Bay in central Queensland, is the perfect jack-of-all-trades for the mission, having spent time as a fishing boat skipper and an ambulance officer. He also has a commercial dive ticket.

Brothers Robert and Andrew Latimer of Victoria bought a 16-metre cutter, Chimere, and fitted it out for the purpose of taking volunteers to some of the archipelago's most remote destinations. Most of Vanuatu's population of about 230,000 live on more than 80 tiny islands.

The Latimers formed Medical Sailing Ministries (MSM), comprising volunteers from the Ringwood Uniting Church in Victoria. They joined forces with the founder of the Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project, Don MacRaild, and his wife, Meg, retired school teachers from Victoria who have been operating the service for about 10 years.

MSM undertook its first mission last year, with 4200 patients seen at 18 islands. Mr Latimer said it soon became apparent that blindness wasn't the only problem. "We saw everything from broken limbs to gangrene and serious complications with pregnancies," he said. "Even though they have so little, they are a wonderfully happy group of people and a joy to be with."

A crew delivery of five sailors arrived on the island of Tanna, south of Port Vila, on Friday, carrying about a tonne-and-a-half of mainly donated goods and eye surgery equipment funded by the federal government's overseas aid program, AusAID.

With no place for boats to dock, the crew and equipment must be ferried ashore by dinghy, often a hazardous undertaking.

Donations include about 2500 pairs of eye glasses, medical supplies including bandages and dressings, as well as second-hand chisels, files and hand saws and glue for crafts, school books, clothing, dental kits, wind-up torches, moulds for mud bricks for making stoves, a potting wheel and sports equipment.

The mission returns in August. Those wanting to sign up for next year's mission can do so at www.msm.org.au.

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