

THE VAIOLA HOSPITAL PROJECT...

25 years on

In 25 years, the Vaiola Hospital in Tonga has grown from an unhygienic facility the local community feared, to a hospital capable of open-heart surgery.

*By John Oswald OAM FANZCA
Coordinator, Vaiola Hospital Program
Rotary Club of Ballarat West, Vic*

In 1991-92, a young Tongan anaesthetic registrar, Talia'uli Afeaki, spent 18 months training in Victoria's Ballarat Health Services. During this time, he approached the Rotary Club of Ballarat West in the hope of help to set up an intensive care unit (ICU) upon his return to Vaiola Hospital, Nuku'alofa, Tonga.

The hospital was in crisis at the time, having run out of money for food and drugs and borrowing on the following year's budget to keep afloat. Pigs roamed the hospital grounds and rubbish was dumped out windows. Staff, often skilled and trained in Australia and New Zealand, could only do so much in dank and primitive facilities.

As well as the obvious infrastructure problems, diseases were rife in the community. Patients feared the hospital, as they believed visiting would result in death. As a result, sufferers put off their admission until they were nearly dead. Once admitted, many died, fulfilling the prophecy. In the preceding three years, 65 leg amputations were performed due to diabetic complications.

In response, the Rotary club, in conjunction with the St. John of God Hospital, sent a large supply of surplus medical equipment early in 1992. Seven retired cardiac monitors formed



The CT scanner donated by the Chinese government.

the nucleus of this original shipment.

Following this, John Macdonald, charge nurse of ICU at the hospital, and Rotarian John Oswald, were invited to speak at the Tongan Medical Association AGM. During the trip, they visited the Rotary Club of Nuku'alofa, which was well-aware of the situation at Vaiola.

After a recent damning series of articles in the local news, many were determined to improve the situation. A committee was formed, involving the Rotary Club of Nuku'alofa, the government and the hospital, to

raise funds and to examine ways to upgrade their hospital. They had raised the equivalent of \$AU50,000 – an enormous amount for a small, impoverished community.

The CEO of St. John of God Hospital suggested the \$50,000 be used principally to establish a Twinning Program. Two groups of four Tongan staff would be selected on a needs basis from Vaiola each year to spend four weeks at St. John of God Hospital. In turn, similar groups of health professionals from St. John of God Hospital would visit Vaiola each



ABOVE:
The dental
department.
RIGHT: The
new, well-
maintained,
hospital.



year to teach, mentor and to support their opposite numbers. St. John of God Hospital pledged \$25,000 per year for the next five years to fund living and transport costs for staff involved in the project.

In September 1993, the first teams from Ballarat went to Tonga. In 1996, AusAID agreed to contribute to funding the exchanges and, in the decades since, 132 staff exchanges have been reciprocated.

Much of the credit for the success goes to John, who worked tirelessly to relieve the isolation and social restrictions of the health system and support and develop staff. When he

announced his retirement after 25 years, there were tears all round – from the Minister of Health down to the many people trained in Ballarat under his watch, whose determination to improve their health system and their own professionalism has been the source of energy for this program.

As well as spurring the Twinning Program, Rotary sent several teams of maintenance volunteers to conduct repairs and installations through the early form of the RAWCS program. Trevor Chapman, of the Rotary Club of Ballarat South, repaired the oxygen concentrator in the face of many previous failed attempts by commercial

companies. This alone saved the Department of Health many thousands of dollars per year. The Rotary Club of Ballarat West also organised and shipped several consignments of donated goods from a wish-list developed by Vaiola medical staff.

Matching grants of several hundred thousand Australian dollars were further obtained from The Rotary Foundation to help fund the purchase of equipment. Support for these grants came from the USA, New Zealand and other clubs in Ballarat and Victoria. Donations In Kind (DIK) Geelong has been very supportive, shipping up to two containers a year.

Contacts sourced through the program additionally led to the development of the dental program by Ballarat West in 1996, which, over the past 20 years, has brought Tongan dental professionals to Ballarat and Melbourne for further education. It has likewise sent teams of dentists to train onsite, and enormous quantities of surplus dental equipment consigned by DIK to Tonga. A radiological twinning program has also been set up recently by Lake Imaging in Ballarat, and a prosthetics program is imminent.

Thanks to the Twinning Program there have been dramatic improvements in the ICU, in wound care, nursing, administration and every other aspect of the hospital over the course of the past 24 years. Doctors now perform open-heart surgery – an astonishing transformation from the facility where pigs once roamed through rubbish-clogged grounds.

Further, the project has developed capacity and graduated from a Rotary supported program to a private, DFAT supported program. The Twinning Project has provided the infrastructure for additional aid programs from Australia, New Zealand, Japan and China, and visiting surgical programs such as Interplast.

The Rotary Club of Ballarat West is very proud of its involvement over the years. Members watch in awe as the project only develops further. •