

PROJECT FEEDBACK



DR PETER MASSEY AND ROWENA ASUGENI



Supporting TB treatment supporters Solomon's style

Tuberculosis (TB) continues to be an important global health problem. More than 10 million cases and about 1.8 million deaths are estimated to occur annually - more than 50% of the global burden in the Asia Pacific Region. Women and men have different combinations of risk factors for TB and follow different pathways to seek diagnosis and treatment. The organisation of TB treatment services is a major factor in how people decide to seek care and follow treatment plans. How services connect with people, communities and culture impacts how effective the services are. In many settings, health services have not been designed with community needs as the focus, and as a result TB is not able to be controlled. Thankfully the work undertaken in East Kwaio, Solomon Islands, supported by the ARC, is redressing this inequity.

TB mainly affects women when they are economically and reproductively active, while the impact of the disease is felt by their children and families. Because women have an integral role in health of families in many settings, especially in East Kwaio, Solomon Islands, it is essential that TB issues are seen through the eyes of the women it affects, and that the voices of women and their stories are valued.

In Kwaio society, caring is one of the most important roles for women. Women care for their husbands, children, household, animals, family members, communities and the society as a whole. Women do gardening work like slash and burn, planting, weeding, digging and collecting root crops for household consumption. Women's household duties include preparing food for the family, cleaning in and around the house, bathing the children and washing clothes. Many Kwaio women are also responsible for feeding the animals and cleaning animal waste. TB in the family therefore can be a significant extra burden for women.



The Atoifi Adventist Hospital (AAH) has been leading an ARC - supported project along with the Atoifi Health Research Group, Hunter New England Health, James Cook University, Central Queensland University, and Tropical Health Solutions, to further develop TB services, approaches and resources to better support women. AAH is the only hospital in the Eastern region of Malaita and it provides health services to the whole

of Eastern region people which includes Kwaio, Kwara'ae, Are'are and Fataleka. TB services include diagnostic tests for TB, case finding, follow ups, contact tracing and TB awareness. The Hospital has an old TB ward with 6 beds and a new culturally safer TB Ward that is near to the "bush".

The project was focused in the remote East Kwaio area on the island of Malaita in Solomon Islands. This area has one of the highest rates of TB in the Pacific, outside of PNG. The aims of the project were to listen to women and community leaders; and develop a DVD that shows stories and information about better supporting women. The project brought individuals, families, communities, churches, and health services together to help fight and control TB disease.

The team was led by Chief John Wakageni, RN, Coordinator for Women and TB project. The team also includes Chief Esau Kekeubata, Dorothy Esau and Grace Alaka (both TB Community Officers) and Tommy Esau



(Research Worker). The TB team worked with villages known as "TB hotspots" including Jordan in the Kwaibaita Valley and Kwainaa 'isi and Kafurum villages in the East Kwaio mountains.

The project was based with the community and women were integral in the project's development and success. A news story posted by the Atoifi Health Research Group highlights the "new start" that communities were calling for: <http://www.atoifiresearch.org.sb/node/119>

The DVD content was developed through workshops and discussions and then recorded, edited and produced locally. The resource was pilot tested with families and communities and adjustments were made. The DVD resource and the new approach of supporting women are now being implemented at AAH by the Primary Health Care team, and the TB nurses at the Hospital.

Early results of the project were presented at the International Union Against TB & Lung Disease Asia Pacific Region Conference in Sept 2015 and at a National Health Research conference in Solomon Islands. As a result of the ARC support for the AAH Director of Nursing and TB Project

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Manager, Rowena Asugeni, to attend the IUTLD conference further collaborations were established. These new collaborations have resulted in a publication advocating for a greater focus on gender in TB:

- Sex, Gender and Tuberculosis in the Asia-Pacific. Mason P, Asugeni R, Massey PD, Snow K, Viney K. Australian New Zealand Journal of Public Health. 2016. doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12619 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=sex+gender+and+tuberculosis+in+the+Asia-pacific>

In the village-level discussions, families and communities identified the following challenges: long distances to clinics and Hospital, not enough support and care from the community, husbands and family not happy with women being away from home (for treatment), cultural taboos around menstruation and food security. Cultural and financial barriers can also act as major obstacles for women seeking care resulting in delayed presentation and more severe illness. If TB services and communities can better support women who then in turn support their families, it is possible that TB control can be improved.

The project was very successful. The project not only has developed a very useful DVD for supporting TB treatment in women, it has started change in how TB is managed to enable a greater focus on women.

Many people expressed positive feedback to the TB team. A group from Jordan community have committed to a "New Start" to support individual and families with TB. The leader of the community, Mr Isafi, challenged everyone by saying, "that in order to help fight TB in East Kwaio, the health services, communities, church leaders, chiefs, families and individuals need to work closely together." He went on to say that people with a chronic cough need to come and get checked at the clinic, and have their sputum tested.

The development and the use of the DVDs has raised awareness of the importance of supporting women in relation to TB. TB cases admitted and treated through AAH have again increased during 2016 showing that the TB service is becoming more appropriate for the setting.

Most women in the community have supported the development of this project, which will help the communities to come to some common understanding that it is the responsibility of everybody to help and assist. And by doing this, it will help the family members who are affected by TB disease and reduce the effects of TB in this remote part of the Pacific.

The ARC and other groups working towards TB control and elimination would benefit from closely considering the role that gender has in TB. In areas such as East Kwaio, where gender has a significant impact on access to health services because of socio-cultural reasons, considering gender when promoting TB prevention and treatment is of primary importance.

AAH continues to have a strong relationship with Hunter New England Population Health, James Cook University and Central Queensland University. The group also really appreciate the strength of the partnership with the ARC that has developed since 2013 and a number of important projects. The seeds that have been planted through these projects are starting to grow and mature.

