

## SI Adelaide Birthing in the Pacific...( 2011- 2017 )

### SI Adelaide's meeting with several midwives from PNG by Marrion Saunders

#### THE STORY SO FAR



Birthing in the Pacific, was a SISWP project which started in 2011 in PNG.

The first Co ordinator of the project was Janet Askern, a midwife from Queensland.

When Janet couldn't continue due to ill health, May Lamont, a former teacher, took over the co ordinating role.

#### **The situation in PNG was as follows:**

**The maternal birthing outcomes in PNG are poor (in fact, worst in the world) and the project plan was to provide midwives who attend any up skilling programs with a pouch of essential clinical tools required in their busy clinical daily business.**

**It is evident that in most facilities there is a limit to the number of tools available to them to take the basic vital signs necessary to form any sort of clinical opinion. At present, there may be 1 clock, not on a wall, to use to take the pulse of 10 -50 women. Few midwives and nurses have their own personal watch or stethoscope.**

**We have identified that many of the nurses do not have access to reading spectacles and therefore cannot read basic printed tools or indeed able to record any observations they may have taken. Magnifying glasses are a quick answer.**

- **Maternal mortality rate- 733 per 100,000live births (compared to Indonesia average of 350 and Australia 8-10**
- **Worst in Pacific region**

After much hard work, the project came to pass across the SISWP Federation. SISWP clubs took on provision of basic equipment for Community Health workers at the conclusion of their training. In fact when Alice Wells was our International President between 2011-2013, she took on Birthing in the Pacific as her International President's project which meant, SI, worldwide, donated to the project. Eventually the time-frame for the project was extended to 8 years.

SI Adelaide was particularly fortunate during the period of this project, to meet several midwives from PNG. Through one of our members, Pat Ellis, who had a family connection in PNG, we learned that there were midwives in upskilling training and

study, at Flinders University. Pat made contact with Flinders and our club began a wonderful relationship with a succession of midwives over a number of years, which brought Birthing in the Pacific to life for us. Paula Krai was but one of them, but our relationship has been ongoing.

In 2011, when Lesley was President, we met Celine Tusalah, a mature woman from Bougainville Island studying for a Masters in Midwifery and with many years' experience with birthing mothers and their children. She spoke at a meeting of the Adelaide Club in 2011 and later gave a very impressive power point address at the SA Soroptimist Regional Meeting, followed by speaking at a fundraising film. We asked Celine what she needed to help with her work on Bougainville and at her request purchased from the United States an Advanced Childbirth Simulator and Palpation Module in November 2011 and another, sharing the cost with SI Southern, in August 2012 at a cost of \$1,394 each. The money raised by both clubs also purchased a data projector which Ms Tusalah could use for teaching purposes.



Also in 2011, Kath Gribble from SI Barossa, sourced a donation of disposable gloves from Kimberley Clark. These were to be shared between Celine and Veronica Edoni, who was from Alotau. What we didn't know at the time, was the challenge of transporting goods to PNG.



In 2012, just prior to flying home, Marrion asked Celine if there was anything she'd like to take home, other than the hospital where she'd been training. Celine replied "A microscope. We have to share the TB one in the gynae department."

Marrion happened to know someone working in cytology (Pap smears). She couldn't help but remembered that a friend working in the Dental School had just had new equipment - & the short story is that they were happy to give us one. As Celine was leaving at 6am the following morning, this required a rushed visit to the city, in 5pm traffic to collect the microscope. Marrion and Rod rushed home to have a meal, then took the microscope out to Celine at Bellvue Heights, before Celine vacated her premises to stay somewhere closer to the airport, for her early morning flight. Celine was last seen clutching the precious microscope, wrapped in bubble wrap, ready for carrying onto the plane (not letting it out of her grasp).



We have had intermittent contact with Celine and in 2017 we partnered with SI Eastern Districts in a movie Fundraiser at Wallis Mitcham, with funds going to Celine who now is Director of the Arawa School of Nursing on Bougainville.

Pat keeps up contact through facebook.

In 2017 we partnered with SI Eastern Districts, to raise funds for Celine's new School of Nursing.

**Arawa School of Nursing receives certification  
Bougainville....PNG...Nov 2016**



**Director of Nursing.....Celine Tusulah**

In 2012, Pat visited PNG and while she was there, she presented a stethoscope and oximeter to Alotau hospital and reconnected with Veronica.



**2012 October, Pat wrote:**

I have just come back from Alotau Hospital, where I presented the items that our Soroptimist Club has donated to the Alotau Hospital through Veronica. I had to be there at 8.30 and sat in on a weekly meeting of doctors and senior hospital staff. There must have been over 50 present plus others listening through the windows. At the end of the meeting the CEO asked Veronica to introduce me and I told them about Soroptimist Clubs and that all the clubs in the world were working towards the improvement of Child and Maternal Health in PNG. The CEO gave the stethoscope and oximeter (or whatever it was) to one of the senior doctors but when we got outside Veronica grabbed it from him and gave it to another senior doctor in the Midwifery Department.

2013 Heart monitors to PNG....Fundraiser at Urrbrae House, with Jane Wilson and Janis Laurs to raise funds for Mary Mugabe who was nursing in the hills of PNG.



In 2016, when Donna was President, we met Cherolyn another midwife and we donated dopplers for Lae Hospital.



### **But now to Paula Krai**

SI Adelaide, first met Paula Krai in 2014, when she and 2-year-old son were in Adelaide with her husband Ray, who was studying at Flinders University. She was then a midwife, working in Mt Hagen, PNG. We invited her to speak at a meeting.

She was a quietly spoken, young woman – quite shy – but what she had to tell us was eye-opening and rivetting. She described how they would have up to 6 women at any given time, giving birth. She led a staff of 6 midwives. She described how they use the interior of toilet rolls as Pinard horns. She told us about the HIV levels and how the midwives try to protect themselves by using plastic bags as gloves and washing them to reuse. She described how the frequent “brown-outs” caused the humidicrib to fail. When asked what happens to the babies then, she said simply, “They die.”

This galvanised us into action. We bought a doppler monitor, most of us not having any idea what they were, but with the invaluable guidance and expertise of medical student, now doctor, Izzy Gebler Hughes, we bought 7 Pinard horns. We bought lots of polar fleece, Marrion being a super shopper, knowing when Spotlight had sales and exercising her persuasive powers to the maximum.

Polar fleece is a highly effective, low cost solution to keeping babies warm. Humidicribs are great, but when power supplies are interrupted, their effectiveness is minimal.

The monitor is self-explanatory, the Pinard horns probably haven't been widely used in Australia for many years and came from England. I gave them to Paula unopened and she saw that they had travelled far and asked me how we got them. I described eBay and this opened a whole new world for her! The polar fleece was left uncut and packed into 2 plastic suction bags. It is ideal for the purpose as it can be cut to size when needed, needs no hemming, washes easily and dries quickly. And she and her family left, much overweight, after a year. Her husband now had a Masters in Community Health.

Four years later Paula returned, this time as a student. Masters in Midwifery, once again at Flinders. She brought her now 6-year-old son with her, but left behind Ray and 2 other children, the baby just 9 months old. At this time, while studying at

Flinders, Paula was living at Klemzig which was the most affordable accommodation she could find.

Of course we asked her back to speak to the club. Gone was the shy woman we knew. Still quietly spoken, but much different. She described how she had started a training project for the young mothers and the late teenaged school girls, in skills that would offer employment other than prostitution. More about that later.

Through an informal meeting during History Week 2017, Pam met Paula Medway who was then Chair of the College of Midwives. She advised us of the upcoming conference at the Hilton Hotel, and issued an invitation for Paula to participate in this conference, as a midwife from a UN low income country, with costs shared by the College of Midwives and Soroptimist International of Adelaide.

Participation in this conference changed Paula's life.

As a result of this, she changed the subject of her Masters thesis because she could see a better way to help the women of PNG. She had already submitted to the Ethics Committee, so had to resubmit. In looking back through her sms to me to write this, I found one from 2018 apologising for not replying to me. She had succumbed to a stress headache, which the GP put down to juggling thesis writing, submitting to the Ethics Committee, a child in anew school – doing a budget proposal for community development in Western Highland Province – not to mention the odd washing, cooking, etc.

Paula finished and passed her Masters and off she went, laptops, child, more polar fleece, a donation of \$AU towards her project in Mt Hagen and lots of experiences to form her next adventure.



To achieve the training project for young mothers and teenage school girls, Paula needed rooms. On campus was a house, owned by the Catholic Bishop, so she went to see him and asked if she could use it. He agreed. In fact, he provided the money needed for it to be "fit for purpose" and gave it to the school/her. All she needed now was equipment. (We managed to find 2 laptops for her, but she could only take 1 back, as she had her own and would only be allowed 1 per person. Any others would be confiscated at customs. I can't remember what became of the other. I probably gave it back to the donor.)

Paula recounted an incident that took place shortly before she left. She was advised of a woman giving birth (in her home). The woman was bleeding. So she set off with a co-worker, on the local bus, carrying the necessary bits and pieces.

They found the woman had a placenta previa. Without very good intervention, this would be fatal. They set up 2 drips(!!!) and took her back to the birthing unit ON THE BUS. Paula had the presence of mind to have her co-worker video this on her phone, while they juggled the drips and the bleeding woman.

She was safely delivered!

This was the last straw for Paula. The next day, she took a bus to Goroke and went to see the local Member of Parliament, without an appointment. Access was difficult but she INSISTED on seeing him and showed him the video. He cried. On the day before she left for Adelaide, a brand new ambulance was delivered – a change from the usual deliveries – to the Mt Hagan birthing unit and she didn't get to use it! But it is there.

In 2017 the club received these photos from Paula...a message of thanks from the women of PNG and the baby snuggled in our polar fleece.



Now, fast forward to April 2021. I happened to see some messages of congratulations on Paula's Facebook from her friends. They were congratulating her on her new job. She is now working as Midwifery lecturer at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Uni of PNG. Husband, Ray is working with DFAT PNG.

They have bought land in Pt Moresby and are building a house.

Add to that – she is hoping her research and study will become a PhD.

Her work with young women in Mt Hagen has blossomed. The first 15 women (Paula's words) "have expanded from being village sellers to Mt Hagen town are operating as small business entrepreneurs. They started selling their PNG crafts (woven PNG bags and sewn PNG women's and men's suits) all over PNG via Facebook advertisements and now to PNGeans in Australia through postage. I visit them every 3 months for clinical supervision of our team."

"I also engage with 2 lecturers from Monash, 2 from Uni of Adelaide, 2 from Dept Health here and me, doing review on the Midwifery Leadership and buddy programme, conducted in 2018 – 2020. 6 Australian Midwives buddied with 6 PNG senior Midwives to improve care. We are reviewing to see if the project had a better outcome, we will roll it out in other Pacific Island countries."

### **I asked Paula what she gained from Soroptimist International.**

- Apart from gifts, she heard politicians speak and discovered that it is not only OK to contact them, but they encourage community input.
- She learnt all sorts of things that we, privileged, from the "first world", take for granted. Even though she already knew the value of education, she took every opportunity that came her way.
- Shyness disappeared. She became brave. She has a great intellect and uses it to the full.
- She has buckets of common sense. She embraces new ideas and new things.

Still, Paula speaks quietly – not diffidently – we really did help her to ask for what she wants. She is a confident woman and I for one am proud to have had her, for a brief time, in my life. And look forward to knowing Dr Paula Krai.

### **What we gave gained from meeting Paula, Celine, Veronica, Mary, Cherolyn:**

- By meeting these dedicated women and building a relationship, we were able to encourage them to say what they needed to make their work easier and safer and to donate what they needed, not what **we thought** they needed.
- We were brave enough to learn from our first donated teaching mannequin, that these were available in colours other than pale "skin", so when we donated a second one, it was more culturally appropriate.
- An increased understanding of the reality of life in PNG and the impact of the terrain in the delivery of health care (relevant now too, to the COVID crisis.)
- The strength of the women when they come to Australia to study, leaving babies, small children and husband to manage the family (not culturally a male task).
- An understanding of the difficulties and challenges of getting parcels, gifts, and donations to PNG, through customs, to the recipient. The women were always restricted by luggage restraints when travelling home.

Our heartfelt thanks to Pat Ellis, without whom, this friendship would never have eventuated.