

Reports from the colleges

PIMHNet trip to Vanuatu 11–30 July 2010

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This was my third trip to Vanuatu, the purpose to supervise the health professionals who had previously been taught by myself and Prof. Dimity Pond in 2009 as part of the Pacific Islands Mental Health Network (PIMHNet), a World Health Organization (WHO) initiative funded by New Zealand Aid (NZ Aid). On the first trip in April 2009, we taught a group of 13 people – four nurses and two doctors from Vila Central Hospital, a clinical nurse tutor from Vila Central Nursing Education, three participants from the community, one from Shefa Rural Health, one from the Vanuatu Police Force and one from public health. This was a four-week interactive course that included learning research skills and a great deal of practical work. On the second trip in October 2009, Dimity supervised the previous participants and provided further training while I trained a new group of people in conjunction with some of the first group of participants. This second group of students consisted of two nurse practitioners, five nurses, and one participant from the Education Department, one from the Police Department, one from a non-governmental organisation, one from Correctional Services, one from the Public Health Unit and one nurse aid.

This third trip revealed the importance of the PIMHNet programme in Vanuatu. Outstanding work has been done by the previous participants from both groups. Their enthusiasm for mental health is seen in their clinic work, their outreach work, their training of other professionals and their thirst for more knowledge.

My purpose was to build the capacity of these two previous groups: to model diagnostic and therapeutic skills in the community; to support group members in their workplaces and help them work through problems they were having; to answer questions; and to encourage them in the amazing work they are doing. My intention was also to consolidate a core of people who could ensure that the mentorship and teaching of the previous participants and of any new professionals would continue, with only strategic input from overseas health professionals.

On this trip I travelled with an administrator and the General Psychiatric Nurse from Vila Central

Hospital to five of the islands in Vanuatu, many of them very remote with limited healthcare facilities. I visited the nurse practitioners who had previously been trained, as well as the nurses and nurse aids that they had trained. We consulted in hospitals, nursing stations, aid posts, grass huts, under trees, in villages etc – often with the chief, the family, the extended family or the whole community taking part.

The list of mental health problems we saw included almost everything one would expect to see in a Western environment. The nurses had used the skills they had learnt to successfully diagnose and treat many of these patients and the families, chiefs and communities identified many other patients who came to see the team for the first time. People with undiagnosed psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression and severe anxiety disorder were being supported by their communities and had all had unsuccessful treatment with traditional medication. The hope engendered by a mental health diagnosis and the possibility of successful treatment was a great relief for both patients and their supports. We also saw many physical problems that were identified as causing neurological or psychological symptomatology, e.g. epilepsy, vitamin B12 deficiency, Parkinson's disease and problems resulting from encephalitis. These were often difficult to diagnose with certainty because of the lack of access to investigations and a clinical diagnosis through a trial of treatment was the only possibility.

Recommendations for the future include ongoing training across the health professions as well as for other service personnel such as teachers and policemen; increased facilities and trained nurses, particularly in the more remote areas; and continued support from experienced health professionals.

Seeing people in their own communities was found to be of the utmost importance. It helped with skills development; raised the profile of mental health and encouraged local people and other health professionals to trust the nurses who had been trained; gave the nurses confidence that they were on the right track; and highlighted the importance

of mental health being embedded in the primary healthcare model.

The success of this trip was way beyond my expectations. The absolute importance of supervising people in their own environments ensures that what PIMHNet and the Government of Vanuatu is

encouraging is culturally appropriate, relevant, comprehensible and achievable. It is a great honour and privilege to have been part of this training and I thank all those involved in organising and facilitating its implementation.

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