



Mission: Tari PNG

Frontlines: A very different experience

MSF Volunteer: Chandrika R Rao, Surgeon

I accepted my posting to Tari with a lot of apprehension. But the reality was quite unique. Tari seemed like a hill station – beautiful, lush green, unexplored, unspoilt and wild. It was a pleasure to snuggle into soft blankets at night after a hot shower and wake up gazing at misty mountains. Very unlike magical Africa where I had done most of my missions.

It was amazing to see that so-called development had not yet interfered with the Huli people and their lifestyle in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. It was a common sight to see people walking around in grass skirts, feathers decorating their hats and ferns woven around their hair. They grow what they need and the concept of cash and profit has not yet reached them.

The team of international staff consisted of nine people from all over the world. As for the locally-hired staff, we had a wonderful national team. The local operating theatre staff are well trained and quite experienced. It was really a blessing, under the circumstances, because, day and night, we had patients with all kinds of “chopping” injuries – injuries caused by a long bush knife – all over their hands,

arms, feet and other parts of the body. And some are even self-inflicted.

People “chop” each other for many reasons – old rivalries, nagging wives and co-wives, sisters who have had arguments – all resulting in very deep injuries, which made me wonder how such friendly people, who always greeted us in the mornings with a very cheerful and loud “Egarbagi” (good morning), could behave like this?

The other major group of patients comprised of people with huge abscesses on their feet or hands – chronic, neglected infections. This is because of a lack of easy access to the hospital, and patients would stay at home hoping that the infection would control itself, but in vain.

One night a little boy was brought in by his concerned parents with an accidental stab wound of the abdomen with prolapsing omentum. At laparotomy, it turned out that he had multiple mesenteric cysts, unrelated to the stab wound, and required resection anastomosis. It was wonderful under these circumstances to have a super efficient anaesthetist, Gudrun, and not to have to worry about what was happening at the top end of the table while operating.

I remember one young lady, who had come to us with a foul-smelling dry gangrene of her first toe. I was wondering how this young woman could have neglected the infection, and got a clue to the diagnosis when she confessed that she didn't feel any pain at all. So, this diabetic lady was started on the proper management for controlling the sugar and the infection. She was so grateful that she wanted to give me a little piglet as a gift to bring back with me to India.

Unfortunately I had to reject the loving gift... for obvious reasons.

-Chadrika R Rao, Surgeon

In Papua New Guinea, after the ancestral land, the most valuable possession is a pig. We had a few patients with surprisingly vicious pig bites all over their bodies, so not all pigs are adorable Babes or Wilburs!

As in every other project, there was some exciting emergency obs-gynecological work, but luckily Julia, the medical doctor, happened to be an obstetrician, and together we operated on all these challenging patients satisfactorily.

On Sundays we would go for long walks and were also invited to attend Sing-Sings (functions where there was singing and dancing for some special occasions) and also to Mumus (traditionally cooked feasts). It was nice to learn about the different cultural practices of Huli people.

Time flew and it was not long before it was time to hand over and say my farewells to the staff and patients. The night before I left, a young man was brought in with a deeply chopped scalp, extending from the frontal going back all the way across the parietal area and across the left ear, which was chopped into two pieces and dangling by the side of his head. He had a skull fracture all the way. I cleaned and stitched him up and was relieved to see him lucid and coherent on the morning I went to say my final good byes, before boarding the plane out of beautiful Tari.

I left with fond memories, some regrets but also with a deep sense of satisfaction.