

Tuberculosis: A Critical Threat to Our Nearest Neighbors

TAKE ACTION

The Australian Federal Government and the Queensland State Government have recently made a decision to close two clinics currently treating Papua New Guinean (PNG) nationals suffering from Tuberculosis (TB). The clinics are located on the Australian Islands of Boigu and Saibai, within a few kilometers of the PNG mainland. The closure of these clinics will result in the termination of TB services for PNG nationals living in the region, and the transfer of patients back to PNG where current services are sorely lacking.

This month we will write to Federal Minister for Health and Ageing Nicola Roxon, raising the following key points:

1. Acknowledge the Governments efforts to boost health services in the impoverished Western Province of PNG
2. Express concern that the impending closure of the Australian clinics in February 2012 is premature and will affect not only PNG nationals but also place Australian lives at risk
3. Call on the Federal Government to fully fund the clinics operating on Boigu and Saibai islands for another two years or until capacity of the PNG health system is developed and improved enough for patient transfer to occur safely and humanely.

Background: TB in Papua New Guinea

The health status of Papua New Guineans is one of the lowest in the Pacific region and the management of Tuberculosis (TB) poses a significant challenge. TB is one of the leading causes of sickness and death in PNG and in 2008, TB was the second most common cause of in-patient bed occupancy in the country. One issue of grave concern is the high incidence of multi-drug resistant (MDR) TB found amongst Papua New Guineans living in the Western Province of PNG.

Key Terms:

Tuberculosis (TB): A bacterial disease that most commonly attacks the lungs, TB is one of the three major infectious diseases causing fatalities in the developing world. The symptoms of active TB include coughing, sometimes with sputum or blood, chest pains, weakness, weight loss, fever and night sweats. Tuberculosis is treatable with a six-month course of antibiotics.

Multidrug Resistant (MDR) TB: MDR-TB is resistant to the two most powerful anti-TB drugs. This form of TB can take two years or more to treat with drugs that are more toxic and much more expensive. These drugs are not widely available in PNG.

MDR-TB develops when the course of antibiotics for treatment of TB is interrupted and the levels of drug in the body are insufficient to kill 100% of bacteria. MDR-TB can be spread from person to person as readily as drug-sensitive TB and in the same manner.

Closure of TB Clinics: A Critical Issue

The absence of quality health services for TB control in the Western Province has inevitably led to individuals seeking access to treatment at health clinics on the Australian Islands of Boigu and Saibai, located within a few kilometers of the PNG mainland¹ (see map below). The clinics are partly funded by both the Queensland and Australian Commonwealth governments and are currently treating 60 PNG nationals with TB, over a quarter of who are infected with MDR-TB. The Australian Federal Government and the Queensland State Government have recently made a decision to close these two desperately needed clinics as part of cost saving measures now being implemented by both governments. The closure of these clinics will result in the termination of TB services for Papua New Guineans living in the region, as well as the transfer of 60 TB patients back to PNG.

Patients will be transferred back to the 90-bed Daru General Hospital located in the impoverished Western Province of PNG. The hospital is grossly under-staffed and has difficulty accessing clean water, sanitation and the appropriate medication required for the treatment of TB. Buildings and equipment are dilapidated and broken and when reporters from *The Age* newspaper visited recently, the hospital had not received deliveries of basic medical supplies for months. There were no anesthetics or antibiotics and its X-ray machine and small pathology unit were not functioning.

Australian Government Response

The Federal Government announced in early September that it would commit \$1.1 million to improve health services in PNG's Western Province, and part of this aid package would be allocated to improvements at Daru hospital. The Government announced that the clinics would be maintained until February 2012, whilst improving national capacity for the management TB in PNG.

Whilst the AusAID package for PNG is a good start, Australian health professionals have condemned the planned closures as unethical and TB experts have raised their concerns that the process will not only jeopardize the health of individuals currently being treated, but will also pose an increased risk for the transmission of MDR-TB to both PNG and Australian citizens, particularly Aboriginal Australians, living in the region.

Dr. Graham Simpson, an Australian respiratory specialist, was asked to oversee the transfer of services from Torres Strait to PNG. He refused, stating that it was unethical and an attempt by government authorities to give the closures false credibility.

Experts suggest that building the capacity of the PNG health system to tackle TB in the Western Province will take a minimum of two years and that it is not feasible for functional services to be established at Daru Hospital or across the region by February 2012. In the meantime, it is essential that in accordance with international standards of care, all PNG nationals identified with TB in Queensland are assured of quality treatment. The Australian Government has neglected this advice, which means that in February, patients will be transferred to a setting in which effective treatment for TB will not be available.

For more information, you can view a recent episode of the ABC's *7.30 Report* calling attention to this issue: <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2011/s3254939.htm>

Photojournalist Jason South takes a tour of Daru. These images are taken 10km from Australia's borders. <http://www.theage.com.au/photogallery/world/tuberculosis-and-cholera-outbreak-in-png-20110908-1jjs.html>

¹ An established treaty exists between the governments of PNG and Australia which forms a 'Torres Strait Protected Zone', which allows free movement of Torres Strait Islanders and inhabitants of coastal villages in the Western Province of PNG across the international border.

A Map of the Torres Strait Islands, depicting the close proximity of Boigu and Saibai Islands to mainland Papua New Guinea.

