



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MOTIONS

Youth With a Mission Medical Ships Australia

SPEECH

Monday, 17 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 17 August 2015
Page 8413
Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (10:39): I congratulate the member for Leichhardt on introducing the Marriage Legislation Amendment Bill 2015. He will certainly be on the right side of history. I also want to acknowledge his support for the people of Papua New Guinea over many, many years.

Papua New Guinea has some of the lowest living standards and worst health outcomes in our region. The World Health Organization estimates that life expectancy for the people of Papua New Guinea is 62 years for men and 65 years for women. In 2005, 14,000 of the total of 15,000 child deaths that occurred in the Pacific region were in Papua New Guinea. Given these figures, it is no surprise that Papua New Guinea's health status is one of the worst of any nation throughout our region or the world.

For a population of more than seven million people, Papua New Guinea has fewer than 400 doctors, and only 51 of them work outside the capital, Port Moresby. It is a country that is really ruled by its geography and, as such, isolation continues to be a real barrier to proper treatment. This is something that the former Rudd and Gillard governments understood. We targeted our health and overseas development aid budget for Papua New Guinea to deal with some of these issues.

In July 2013 I was fortunate, as the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, to go to Papua New Guinea, to Daru in the Western Province—one of the most remote regions—to open the tuberculosis clinic that was funded by the Australian government. That was a \$33 million investment in a 22-bed TB isolation ward and ablutions clinic. It is housed at the Daru General Hospital.

As part of that \$33 million commitment we also funded a sea ambulance. The role of the ambulance was to travel up and down the Fly River to some of the most remote villages of Papua New Guinea and bring people who were suspected of tuberculosis contagion back to the clinic which the Labor government had funded at the hospital. By all accounts, that service is still running and still doing an excellent job in fighting what is a very big problem within Papua New Guinea, particularly in the western region—tuberculosis.

This was a partnership. It was a joint effort by the Australian government, the Papua New Guinean government and also the Ok Tedi Fly River Development Program. It is pleasing to see that that program has got results. In the first year—in one year alone—it reduced the mortality rate from drug-resistant tuberculosis from 25 per cent to just five per cent. The program has the support of the United Nations and other NGOs that have been working in that region fighting tuberculosis for many years. This was a great example of a Labor government understanding the challenge of remoteness, of the inaccessibility of proper health care for many people in the regions of Papua New Guinea, and working with the Papua New Guinean government and other organisations to combat it. The results speak for themselves.

In that light, it is pleasing to see that the Abbott government is supporting similar initiatives. The YWAM initiative is in that vein, providing medical services through sea ambulances and other vessels to remote regions of Papua New Guinea, albeit at a reduced rate of support. Unfortunately, the Abbott government has moved some of the focus of our overseas development aid away from poverty reduction and sustainable development. That is a key outcome that has been taken out of Australia's overseas development aid program. Unfortunately, I think you are not going to see the level of support that is necessary, particularly in the Pacific, for programs such as this, which reduce preventable diseases in remote regions throughout the Pacific. The \$11.3 billion cut the Abbott government made when it comes to overseas development aid will have an effect, unfortunately, on programs such as the one I mentioned a moment ago.

I have been speaking quite closely with a number of NGOs and overseas development aid organisations who are uncertain about whether or not many of the programs that they run in places like Papua New Guinea will continue into the future. I congratulate Mrs Prentice for moving this motion. If there is one thing that comes out of this it is that the Abbott government needs to explain to the NGOs and organisations that do this great

throughout the Pacific whether or not their funding will be continuing and whether or not they can continue to run these programs.