



ISLAND PARAMEDICS:

Adventures in caring

By Steve Whitfield

Have you ever wondered what it is like to drop everything, pack your bags and stethoscope and travel to a remote corner of the earth? Meet Elise and Olivia, two Australian based paramedics from diverse backgrounds who shared the common goal of adventures in caring, and did just that!

HELD GLOBALLY in March each year, International Women's Week recognises and celebrates the achievements of women internationally. As part of this celebration we thought it fitting to interview these two ladies who are currently providing professional ambulance care within Vanuatu's main ambulance service, ProMedical on the remote island of Santo.

Vanuatu is a Pacific island nation made up of 83 islands within the geographical confines of the South Pacific. Approximately a quarter of a million people inhabit this archipelago with a predominately rural population that creates geographical challenges in health care.

Working with their Vanuatu counterparts since February, I had the pleasure of catching up with them on the tarmac for a quick chat following a successful remote retrieval.

Can you tell us who you are and where you're from?

Liv. I am from Victoria, Australia and completed a Bachelor of Nursing and Paramedics in 2016. Since then I have worked as a Paramedic with Ambulance Victoria.

El. I am from North Queensland, Australia. I worked as a Theatre Nurse for a couple years before recently completing a Post Graduate Diploma of Clinical Services (Paramedics) with Charles Sturt University.

What inspired you to volunteer as a paramedic here in Vanuatu?

Liv. I've come to realise that many people don't have the luxury of a professional ambulance service and the geographical challenges in northern Vanuatu mean that sometimes there are long delays. I want to use my skills and assist all people get help regardless of location just as we would expect at home.

El. I was looking for a way to keep my skills up to date and I have always considered volunteering but never been able to find a program where I was actually able to use my skills and not just observe. Vanuatu was recommended to me by a colleague and once I did some research I was sold. Who wouldn't want to work in a tropical paradise?

Being so remote, what are some of the clinical challenges that you have experienced or expect?

Liv. Often you can be the only qualified paramedic on duty on the island, servicing 40,000 people. Santo has large stretches of land with roads and infrastructure which has suffered from floods and lack of maintenance. One job can take a whole shift, and for some of my colleagues one job even took multiple days of camping in local villages. Luckily ProMedical has a critical care paramedic on call from the main island for any consults, unfortunately much of Santo island is out of range rendering cell phones sometimes useless.

Operating with limited resources forces you to gain confidence and rely on your own skillset and knowledge. Like a reef knot; the more stress placed, the stronger it becomes. I really didn't appreciate the knowledge and skills I had till they were put to the test.

I learnt to adapt with the limited resources I had. Gloves as tourniquets, the jacket off my back to tilt major blood vessels off pregnant bellies, paediatric masks on large adults and securing cannula's with whatever was available. You adapt and utilise every bit of equipment like it's the last coffee bean at an ambulance station.

El. Some of the clinical challenges included a lack of resources, low stock levels, and equipment failures both in the pre-hospital setting and in the hospital setting. It makes you really think outside the box and utilize only what you need and save what you can where you can.

I note that there has been a cyclone watch recently, has this impacted your ability to deliver prehospital care?

Liv. The frequent cyclones and remoteness of the islands create large challenges for Ni-Vanuatu's (locals) to access healthcare. Patients on the outskirts of Santo or nearby islands can travel 8 hours via boat to arrive at a safe rendezvous point with the ambulance. This access is frequently interrupted by poor travel conditions, such as rain or cyclones. An unfortunate patient's boat had to be turned around due to poor weather due to a nearby cyclone. No further call out was requested, with a likely poor outcome as an explanation.



El. Due to the rain, the roads were damaged and flooded which made it impossible to get to some of the remote health clinics in the north and south. I believe it also affected the phone reception and patients were unable to contact us for help.

What do you miss most about home?

Liv. Roadworks. This is no exaggeration, but I finally appreciate those long stretches of ghastly slow roads. Maintenance is difficult and the result are some large pot holes battered along the road like a chickenpox outbreak. There is a village far East, called Tasiriki, which takes 3 hours of intense 4x4 driving. The skills the local student paramedics have in driving this route could win them some championships around the world. (Yes, apparently 4WD races are thing. Maybe competitors should just come to volunteer in Santo!) Jokes aside, the terrible terrain compromises healthcare to a shocking extent. We transported a patient in premature labour for 4 hours across this terrible terrain, having to stop for every assessment and intervention. But fast enough to beat the rain which would have flooded the roads, leaving us stranded in the middle of nowhere with no reception and a 32-week gestation newborn requiring intensive care.

El. To be honest I didn't really miss much about home. I really enjoyed my time in Vanuatu, the people and the surroundings where lovely and I felt at home. The town of Luganville reminds me of a small country town in Australia and it had all the necessities to live comfortably for the month.

If you had an opportunity to describe one experience here on Santo what would that be and why?

Liv. During my time in Santo, myself and my colleagues responded to many sick patients. Although interesting, and maybe a binge worthy Netflix series in itself, the experience I want to describe isn't those. What I found quite fascinating was black magic. I had heard the term, but my mind reverted to Voo-doo dolls rather than any realistic traditions.

Often patients we visited had first visited their local "healer" in western terms. They receive a multitude of treatments I'm sure scientists and medical professionals alike would have a field day speculating over. A Ni-Vanuatu pointed out leaves in the forest that were burnt and applied to fractures

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At first, it looked as if there was a lot of damage but as we got closer we could see that the hand/wrist/arm was still intact and she had a big laceration across the base of her left thumb extending over the dorsal side of her hand and down toward her wrist. She had a piece of cloth tied tight around her wrist and her upper arm as a tourniquet. We removed the cloth from the upper arm.

After failed cannulation, Pascal performed a block around her wrist and the wound, which immediately relieved her pain. We washed the wound as best we could and applied a pressure dressing, splint and bandages.

During the bumpy ride to hospital, she was comfortable with only a small amount of pain relief for the first 30 minutes, however her pain increased from the rough ride. During transport she was stable until hospital where she became bradycardic and hypotensive. At the hospital Pascal and I were required to further assist the doctor assess and stabilise the wound. When asked about how the injury occurred, the patient recalled she was outside in the garden and attempted to smack her child. Her child ran behind her grandmother who was holding a big bush knife and when she went to smack her child her hand hit the knife accidentally. Whoops!

If you could share a dinner with two people who have inspired you, who would it be and why?

Liv. The first person I would choose is a special lady known as the Santo branch Mumma. The other paramedic volunteers and I were lucky enough to have been invited to her home for a traditional dinner. She has lived tough, and despite her limited resources brings so much joy and happiness to her community. Only two years ago she could afford to connect electricity to her house. This meant her children could finish their homework at night. Despite this, she still opens her doors to multiple young children with no roof over their head.

The second person includes many. All of the inspiring nurses, midwives and doctors working on the remote locations dotted throughout Vanuatu. Witnessing the efforts of nurses and midwives on outer islands, where they are the only healthcare professional isolated by hours of tough terrain or boat rides. I would love to travel to the incredibly diverse and isolated places to spend the night with these incredible people. Hopefully someday I will!

El. I would choose two people that I met in Vanuatu. The first one is Temox, a nurse from the Solomon Islands who works in a very remote village on Santo. There is no road access therefore if a patient needs to be admitted to the Northern Provincial Hospital in Luganville, they have to

for analgesia and realignment. There were other particular leaves that are chewed by the healer and spat into open wounds to keep the evil out. In many patients you could find chewed up grass in wounds or patients lathered in salt. One shift, I was warned by my colleague to watch out for flying leafy spit balls whilst cannulating as I was introducing an open wound therefore a path to evil to enter. I never thought I'd be looking out for flying spitballs when checking for dangers in my primary survey.

El. Local Ni-Vanuatu Paramedic Pascal took a call about a lady in Big Bay who had apparently amputated her hand. With limited information provided he instructed them to place a tourniquet on to stop the bleeding. It took a very bumpy 2 hour drive to reach the patient during which time a local who was with the patient rang us every 30 minutes to get an update on our location.

On arrival there were over 30 people surrounding the patient. Two ladies were fanning her with traditional woven fans and another lady on each side of her, holding her arms and trying to comfort her. She was screaming in agony.



walk four hours to catch the boat and then endure an eight hour boat ride to Matantas. Here the ambulance is able to access the boat at a beach and then the ambulance has a two hour drive back to the Hospital with half of the drive being off road. Temox is the only health professional working in the clinic and basically has to do everything a doctor would normally do under guidance. I take my hat off to Temox living in such a remote village and having such a large responsibility with no back up!

The second would be Ryan, a doctor working in the four bed emergency department at the Northern Provincial Hospital in Luganville. He is a Ni-Vanuatu that studied his medical degree in Havana, Cuba. Although I didn't get to see much of what Dr Ryan did in the emergency department, I feel that it would be very interesting to sit down and talk about the large variety of interesting cases he sees on a daily basis.

For me, I find I love listening to experiences and all the cool stuff other people have seen and done in the hope that one day I will have my own cool stories to share.

What are some things you hope to achieve / personal goals in paramedicine in the next couple of years?

Liv. I have already signed up to provide more volunteer aid in other countries. I have a long term goal to work as many projects as possible. I look forward to learning more and

doing what I can to bridge gaps in healthcare around the world.

El. I hope to gain experience in all aspects of paramedicine and the health industry. I would love to volunteer more in different countries and help those in need.

When people think of the Pacific islands, they often think of palm trees, white beaches and relaxation. Others think of community work and ambulance.

We thank Elise and Olivia for their time today and we equally we thank them for their ongoing service to the global community.

Anyone keen to know more check out:

www.planetmedic.com.au