



FEATURE ARTICLE

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SDP's Aerial Health Patrol redeployed at Balimo Hospital

The Aerial Health Patrol (AHP), a health initiative launched by PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (SDP) in July 2019 provides primary health care services including vaccinations, family planning, maternal health, WASH programs and out-patient clinics to remote communities in Western Province.

Each patrol team is staffed with seven experienced health professionals. They are supported by a base team, as well as a backup team, to maintain the service continuously, on a rotational basis. During the first seven months, AHP patrols visited 11 hard-to-reach communities on a regular basis, flown in on a dedicated aircraft purchased by SDP and piloted by MAF.

To facilitate this initiative, SDP has funded an airstrip maintenance program and partnered with Marie Stopes and Sago Network. Early this year SDP paid a deposit for a second aircraft which will be delivered towards the end of the year. AHP has also launched a second patrol team that had been visiting another 10 airstrip communities. In due course all 70 airstrip communities will be serviced by six patrols transported by two dedicated aircraft.

However, things have been put on hold with the current state of emergency lockdown on March 24. Rather than seeing this as a setback, the temporarily grounded AHP teams quickly redirected their efforts to supporting the Balimo Hospital by providing targeted health services, and support as part of a joint Government-led COVID-19 response under the leadership of Deputy Provincial Administrator, Mr Rupert Tabua.

The taskforce team comprises 18 personnel from a cross section of Balimo-based stakeholders, including ECPNG Health Services, government departments, World Vision, community leaders, and business partners.

Mr. Tabua said: "Together we achieve more. An individual broom stick cannot sweep the floor, a lot of broom sticks combined will sweep and clean the floor well."

"Cooperation and unity are the utmost need within all stakeholders in this difficult and uncertain times."



Middle Fly COVID-19 Taskforce, led by Deputy Provincial Administrator, Rupert Tabua.

One of the AHP Patrol Managers, Mr John Indoro has been leading the team in Balimo during the transition. He said: “In collaboration with ECPNG Health Services, our team of experienced health professionals has been working effectively to service remote outposts, but we are well placed to support Balimo health services during these challenging times. We have the capabilities to strengthen health systems in the hospital, one of the key result areas within the National Department of Health priorities.”

“Our aim is to provide practical support for the District Health officers who are leading the government’s designated outbreak response.”

In response to Taskforce recommendations, the AHP team will implement, manage and operate a Respiratory Triage Clinic at the Balimo Hospital. People who are unwell with a respiratory illness might be suffering from any one of several infectious diseases (e.g. flu, malaria, TB, the common cold) because they all have similar symptoms. This means if everyone with these symptoms come to the Balimo hospital, it will be overwhelmed.

This is where the Respiratory Triage Clinic can play a vital role. Upon arrival out patients will be registered, triaged, and checked by a health professional. The AHP WASH professionals (water sanitation and hygiene) will assist by providing information (create infection and hygiene awareness; explain how to prevent the spread of infections; and how to care for sick people at home.

“AHP will demonstrate correct hand-washing techniques and will issue each person who attends the clinic a bar of soap, suitable educational leaflets, and a home-made face mask,” Mr Indoro said.

Preparations are under way to ensure adequate supplies will be available. 6,000 bars of soap are already on hand and another 10,000 are on the way. Balimo women have been mobilized through an informal sewing group to sew face masks to be worn by sick people and their family members. This will take pressure off the limited supplies of hospital grade PPE already purchased by SDP for health professionals to use.

AHP has also helped the Balimo Hospital undertake a thorough stock-take of the Pharmacy so that top-up supplies of drugs and other medical supplies can be ordered well in advance. Close attention has also been given to training healthcare staff in the correct PPE protocols. Mr. Ray Krai, AHP’s Health Service’s Superintendent said that he has arranged for all his AHP staff to

undertake two on-line courses in preparation for a COVID-19 outbreak in Balimo. AHP and ECPNG HEO's are also providing COVID-19 training for all hospital health workers.

Mr Indoro thanked ECPNG Health Services and the other stakeholders for their support and collaboration during this time.

The ECPNG Health Services Secretary, Mr Hector Morris said: "We need to work together for COVID-19 and this preparedness has broken down old barriers. "The district is now joining together and working with a single purpose."

Pastor Sam Awaisa, the ECPNG General Secretary agrees, and added: "The ECPNG Health Services division is a practical way of living out our faith. In this time of great uncertainty, it is a joy to see the collaborative approach adopted by the various Balimo organisations as they serve the people together."

Mr Musje Werror, Chairman of the Western Provincial Health Authority said PNGSDP is working closely with us to provide much-needed health services in Western Province. "They are collaborating with the WPHA as well as the Provincial Administration and, as such, are a key partner in the Provincial health system."