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**FEATURE ARTICLE**

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## **A teacher's determination to access medical care and COVID-19 awareness during the SOE**

The State of Emergency (SOE) lockdown has been difficult for the people of Papua New Guinea, and for Gash Yamata, this was certainly the case.

Mr Yamata is the Head Teacher of Dimisisi Primary School, a remote school in Morehead LLG in the South Fly district of Western Province. When Mr Yamata heard that the Aerial Health Patrols (AHP), a health initiative of PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (SDP) was visiting Morehead Health Centre, he walked for three days (145 km) to seek medical care for himself and obtain medical supplies for his community.

Morehead is located on the far side of the Western Province close to the Indonesian border. Access is a challenge. There are few roads, and people such as Mr Yamata, walk long distances to get to the health centre. Moving around this time of year in the wet season is particularly difficult. With so much water around, snake bite is common.

During the SOE, special exemption was granted by the SOE Controller David Manning so that SDP's AHP team could continue visiting remote Western Province communities, such as Morehead where the Health Centre had been closed due to a lack of medical supplies. The SDP team brought in face masks, drugs, vaccines, soap, snake bite bandages and anti-venom. The facility had not had snake anti-venom in over 20 years.

During the first 4-day patrol, the 7-member patrol team of health professionals conducted immunisation, antenatal, family planning clinics and health checks for children at the reopened health facility, working alongside the four nurses stationed there.

The need was so great that the patrol team visited the following week for another 4-day visit to bring in more supplies, provide patient care, and deliver their COVID-19 community awareness programs throughout the community. This second visit had more time for training the health centre staff.



*AHP Patrol Manager, Maggy Mase giving awareness on COVID-19 in Morehead.*

It was during a COVID-19 awareness program that the SDP team met Mr Yamata.



*Mr Gash Yamata, Head Teacher of Dimisisi Primary School.*

“I walked for almost three days to get here. Dimisisi is very remote. The journey to Daru is even longer .... 221kms by foot and dinghy,” said Mr Yamata.

He said during the COVID-19 emergency, it was even more difficult for Dimisisi healthcare workers to travel to the Morehead Health Centre for supplies and medical attention.

“Also, as a result of the lockdown, many people living along the border are struggling to find food. Seeking food is one of the main reasons people have continued to move across the border despite the SOE orders,” he said.

Mr Yamata said he had heard about the travel restrictions and stayed home but made his trip to the Morehead Health Centre because he needed urgent medical attention.

“I want to thank the SDP-AHP team for coming to Morehead and for giving this very important COVID-19 awareness program for my community. You have made it very clear to us about the preventative measures we can take to avoid this deadly disease,” said Mr Yamata.

“The basic hand washing technique demonstrated, and the instructions given about social distancing is very important, thank you. I will be able to take this important awareness back to my people in Dimisisi.”

He said community health education is one of the most important tools to educate the village people but many South Fly communities have missed out. They still need awareness programs and basic health resources to protect themselves.

“Thank you to SDP for the health services provided by AHP. Through your patrol visit to Morehead, I have finally got the opportunity to see a Health Extension Officer (HEO) for the first time in many, many years.”