



PRESS RELEASE

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SDP launches its first Aerial Health Patrol

PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (SDP) launched its Aerial Health Patrol (AHP) on July 17 in Western Province.

The AHP's first flight took off from Balimo bound for Wawoi Falls, a rural community in the remote Western Province bordering Hela. This corner of the province has been particularly difficult for health officers to support because of the logistics.

Western Provincial Administrator Mr. Robert Kaiyun said “we are excited and we are confident that this arrangement is going to help improve our health performance indicators in the province.”

“This initiative gives the opportunity for us to work together to address health issues of our people in regard to referral of patients and the critical issue of drugs distribution” said Mr. Kaiyun. “This initiative is going to make it easier for our health professionals to actually visit our health facilities in remote areas.

AHP is an SDP-funded and managed partnership between Marie Stopes, Australian Doctors International, and the Sago Network. Following months of planning and consultations with the Provincial Government and District Health authorities, a formal MOU was signed, outlining how this exciting new initiative will supplement and complement existing health services.

The concept of rural health patrols serving remote communities is hardly new, but flying in health professionals so they can spend more time helping patients and less time travelling, certainly is.



The AHP team in Upiara.

The AHP partnership is supported by Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) that is providing the pilots to operate an aircraft also funded by SDP, as well as Rural Airstrips Agency (RAA), which is implementing another SDP-funded initiative to bring all 70 airstrips in Western Province back into operation.

AHP is focused on primary health care and the delivery of drugs and other medical supplies to remote communities. Each patrol will stay with a community three days to deliver immunizations; family planning;

maternal and child health care; and conduct outpatient clinics.

The AHP services prioritize preventative measures including Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programs. Sago Network's Ms Jade Worsley said: "we are committed to increasing long-term health outcomes by providing a WASH program that empowers people to improve sanitation and hygiene in their community. We aim to work where needs are greatest, however accessing remote places is often challenging."



The AHP team arriving in Upiara.

Mrs Alice Honjepari from Daru Provincial Health advised AHP that one of the most pressing areas where it can help is supporting immunization programs. In keeping with this priority, Sister Gulu Ilabi, from Balimo District Health accompanied AHP's first patrol to administer the NDoH polio-measles campaign.

There was great excitement when the patrol took off from Balimo airstrip last Wednesday with a large group of well-wishers including Mr Jerry Tamop, the District Administrator and Mr Kawe Biyama, the local Mayor coming out to farewell the team. Mr Roy Biyama, the Member for Middle Fly,

expressed his gratitude and support, saying how good it was to see SDP making things happen.

The patrol made a special stopover at Kamusi to collect government-supplied drug boxes destined for Wawoi Falls but were held up in the logging community because there was no means of transport for the final leg.

This first patrol, under the experienced leadership of AHP's Patrol Manager Mr Ray Krai, was very much a collaborative effort with Mr. Robert Dowi, the ECPNG health extension officer in Balimo joining the team for this initial visit.

Mr Krai, who has worked in rural health in Western Province for many years, said: "*our team was greeted by a very large crowd on arrival and people rushed forward to shake hands and carry equipment, drug boxes and vaccines. Some people had walked up to 8 hours from Somokopo and Lake Campbell for medical assistance. The Wawoi Falls community did everything they could to help the team, including cooking all meals to enable them to work the long hours required to meet the demand. The team worked right up until the plane returned to collect them after three days. The departing team was quite emotional having overcome the access difficulties to provide long-awaited health care to such a deserving community.*"

After their safe return to Balimo, the AHP administrator Mr Graeme Hill, gathered the team together for a debrief to assess how things might be finetuned for future patrols to other communities and the return visit to Wawoi Falls in 5 weeks' time.

The AHP team is currently on their second patrol in Upiara village having departed Balimo on Monday July 22.