

Julie Kamblijambi-Kep – PhD candidate at RMIT University, Australia

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SUMMARY

Julie Kamblijambi-Kep has come a long way from her childhood in the village of Wingi in Papua New Guinea's East Sepik Province. This article explores the support Julie's family provided for her education, her subsequent training as a nurse and her work around the country, including as the coordinator of the maternal health program at the University of Goroka. The article's exploration of various challenges, including the death of Julie's husband and her need to work while raising five children, make it a useful reference point for women in Papua New Guinea, especially those who are committed to helping others by working in the field of maternal and child health.

Julie Kamblijambi-Kep currently resides in Melbourne, Australia, where she is undergoing her PhD studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Julie's PhD examines the transference of knowledge from bachelor-level maternal and child health graduates to village child health volunteers in regard to how to identify mothers and children at risk. It also looks at the immediate and subsequent transportation to health centres for emergency care. Julie holds master's and bachelor's degrees in nursing, both attained through Monash University, Melbourne. In 2011 Julie was awarded an Australia Leadership Award through the AusAID scholarship program of the Australian government in partnership with the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) to undertake her PhD studies (Figure 1).

Julie is originally from Wingi village in the Yangoru-Sausia District of East Sepik Province. She was born on 11 January 1960 to her father Kamblijambi and mother Glenjo. Both her parents were involved in supporting the work of Assemblies of God (AOG) missions in the district. Julie's father was a leader and his Christian values greatly informed her upbringing. Julie is the third born and she has three brothers and a sister. Julie remembers her mother as having a beautiful and loving personality. She was a softly spoken woman who diligently took care of all her children.

Her father was the first man to introduce the work of Christian missions in the village. Julie remembers that she and her siblings had a very close relationship with their parents. They would make gardens and do various household chores together. Both parents were subsistence farmers and had no formal education but took education very seriously and sent Julie and her siblings to school. Both of Julie's parents strived endlessly selling coffee and pigs to pay for school fees. At that time in PNG not many parents allowed their daughters to go to school, as they believed they would fall pregnant and get married too young. To this day, Julie is thankful to her parents for believing in education and for providing this support so she could make something of her life.

Julie spent her childhood growing up in the village – she remembers the cost of a tin of fish was 10 cents and 5 cents for a packet of biscuits. For the most part, however, Julie attended an AOG boarding school. This meant she left home at the age of nine. She recalls being very independent at an early age. Graduating from Hayfield Central School (now Waimba Primary School), Julie appreciates the influence that the expatriate missionary teachers had on her education. The strict discipline and high expectations with English vocabulary were important parts of shaping Julie's life.

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Figure 1. Julie Kamblijambi-Kep.

Julie initially aspired to become a journalist. She remembers being part of the radio broadcasting club for high school students. She recalls selecting journalism as her first choice for career development, and nursing as her second choice. Julie selected nursing because of a dream she had – she vividly remembers the dream which involved travelling up the Sepik River in an outboard motor working as a nurse in villages along the river.

Things changed for Julie when she was involved in a car accident in which one of her high school friends was killed. This was when Julie decided to be a nurse. She believes that God gave her and her friends a second chance in life through the caring hands of nurses at the hospital. Julie remembers with admiration how gentle and kind the nurses were – this was a life-changing experience. She was so inspired by the work the nurses did that after this time she would follow her mother to health centres to observe nurses providing infant clinic services and treatment. Julie has no regrets with her choice to become a nurse, as she believes this was God's calling for her life.

When asked about her career success, Julie emphasizes that she was always the kind of person who would never give up despite challenges. She also attributes her success to having supportive parents and siblings. Julie stresses that the only way to make it in life is not to give up and to be the best one can be when life's opportunities and challenges are presented. As a consequence of her determination, Julie has come a long way. She is the first woman from her village to finish secondary education and enter professional employment, and now she will be the first person from her village to achieve a PhD.

Once Julie attained her nursing certificate from the Port Moresby School of Nursing (now University of Papua New Guinea Medical School), her life took a different course. She began to travel and live in various provinces in PNG, including Western Province, Southern Highlands Province, Eastern Highlands Province, East New Britain Province, National Capital District and her home province. The majority of the work that Julie performed involved providing mothers and infants

antenatal care in remote locations. She recalls working overtime and travelling distances to deliver babies, attending to the emergency obstetrics concerns in remote villages in the odd hours of the night or morning. Although she adores her work, she recalls sometimes spending less time with her children and having little time for leisure activities. In the later years of her career, Julie started training and teaching midwives and nurses the art of maternal health care.

When Julie was in Port Moresby completing a diploma in nursing administration, she met her husband and father of her three biological and two adopted children – four sons and one daughter. She married John Kep in 1988 and they travelled and worked in various provinces in PNG, where John worked as a medical technician at the hospital laboratory while Julie worked as a midwife. Unfortunately, for Julie the journey of marriage was cut short when her husband died in 1998, leaving her to raise five young children on her own. Julie recalls this as the most challenging time of her life. However, she stresses that the unending support of her family and in-laws helped her through this phase of her life, as they were very supportive in helping raise her five young children. After the passing of her husband Julie believes that she acquired new-found strength, and this enabled her to obtain various degrees, including a bachelor's, a master's and now her PhD. Julie continuously reiterates the importance of every woman in PNG attaining some basic form of education and earning some money regardless of the presence or absence of a man in their lives. This is necessary not only for themselves but also for their children so that they are able to provide for themselves and the needs of their children in situations where there is no longer a supportive spouse.

When asked to describe the defining moments in her life, Julie talks about her visits to remote villages and communities with her trainee nurses or students. As the coordinator for the maternal health program at the University of Goroka, she has observed first-hand the realities and hardships that women and newborns face in accessing maternal health services. This led to her realization that providing health care systems alone does not equate to women attending these services. For Julie, it is crucial that these services be brought to and provided for mothers and children, especially in the

most remote areas of PNG. Julie's concern about the lack of provision of services in rural and remote parts of PNG has inspired her to commit to developing practicable maternal health care. This is the focus of her current PhD research.

Reflecting on some of the challenges of health care in PNG, Julie recalls with contempt that some people within her profession are prone to 'mishandling the women'. At times the actions and behaviours of health care professionals toward patients are disrespectful and cruel. As a result some women prefer giving birth in villages and not at health facilities. Julie says:

"I would rather stand up and support the woman and talk for her and I would ask myself all the time, 'How would I feel if I am put in that mother or child's situation?'... I would want to be taken care of properly."

Julie stresses the importance of not seeing nursing as an opportunity for making money but rather as a profession that should be driven by the desire to save lives and help others.

Julie's commitment to her profession has not been without its challenges. Balancing family life with work has always been very difficult as Julie's professional role consumes most of her time and has resulted in her spending very little time with her children. She recalls many occasions being woken up at midnight or being needed over the weekend to attend to a patient. She says she has always prioritized her profession because of her determination to make a difference in the lives of women and children in rural areas. This has been possible because of the support provided by her in-laws and family members, who have enabled Julie to make it through these challenges.

Despite her unquestioned success, Julie remains thankful and gracious about her accomplishments, and maintains that it is important to have the right perspective. She believes that she has encouraged her children to have these qualities and values and to strive to be their best in every area of their lives. Her encouragement of her children seems to have paid off. Julie's eldest son is an aircraft engineer, her second son is a mining engineer, her third son is a fourth year medical student, her fourth son is undertaking matriculation studies and her daughter is in

high school and lives with her in Melbourne.

Julie's hard work and desire to excel got her off to a great start in life. Today she says it is God who has allowed her to persevere and endure. The success of her children has inspired her to continue being a good mother and also a great friend to her children.

When asked what three changes she would like to make in maternal health care in PNG, Julie mentions that it is important that she provides the best care in her job as a health care worker, so that no woman should die during the clinical task that she is involved in. Secondly, she says she wants to be able to provide services to remote areas where women are not able to access conventional maternal health services. And thirdly, she would like men to see the value of the women in their lives and the contribution women

make to humanity. Indeed, she challenges men to value and respect the women in their lives by being involved in the things she is doing. She believes that it is important for men to be exposed to what midwives do in maternal health, so that they are able to take an active and informative role in caring for and supporting their women during childbirth and beyond.

In her spare time, Julie likes visiting her friends and family, cooking, spending time reading and meditating on God. Julie continues to provide mentoring skills to nurses and advice to the government of Papua New Guinea. She hopes that upon completion of her PhD studies, she will be able to bring positive and practical changes to maternal health care and services in Papua New Guinea.