

EDITORIAL

Papua New Guinean women in health and medicine: celebrating women's achievements

Inspiring stories

As a young Papua New Guinean woman, I embarked on this exciting project, following the invitation from Ceridwen, with very few expectations: not because I thought there were few Papua New Guinean women who had made contributions, but mostly because I was curious as to how many submissions we would receive.

Having conversations with friends and fellow young Papua New Guinean women, it became more and more apparent to me that indeed this would be a wonderful project as there were countless women out there who have made immense contributions to their communities. One story of a woman in the rural highlands particularly stood out for me. This woman used her vehicle to assist in transporting people from her community to the hospital when there were emergencies. Like so many other women in Papua New Guinea (PNG), she does not demand attention for her acts. As such, she goes on being a hero in her community with very little recognition from authorities.

Hearing stories of these women was very inspiring and I thought that other young Papua New Guinean women would feel the same if they were to read these, and so I was very excited at the prospect of receiving a multitude of submissions. Unfortunately, the submissions we received were relatively few. There were various difficulties but the logistics of organizing and conducting interviews proved a particular challenge.

While this proved to limit submissions, those we received were nothing short of inspirational. Importantly there was a good spread of stories, including some about 'well-known' women who work in health as well as those who have not been exposed in the media. Personally this was important as all these stories helped me see each person from a different perspective. In a sense it placed all the women on an even playing field. It became apparent that they shared so many similarities: how they were brought up,

their relationships and what propelled them into their careers, and, most strikingly, their aspirations for young educated Papua New Guinean women such as myself.

I was in awe of their achievements and soon realized that this was merely the beginning of an era in which more and more women in PNG would be willing to have their stories told, knowing that it would inspire women such as myself to work in and assist the community.

It was an honour taking part in this project and I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of it.

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Embodying the best of humanity

As someone who has conducted research on gender in PNG, I have worked predominantly with women. Consequently, I have experienced the kindness, patience and dependability of many who have gone out of their way to make my life and work easier or more joyful. Thus, like Annemarie, I am delighted to be able to honour the Papua New Guinean women that we celebrate here. While they represent a particular group, namely women who have made a contribution to the area of health and medicine in PNG, the women whose stories are told here embody the humility and commitment of Papua New Guinean women I have met.

Despite their admirable qualities and achievements, these women tend to go about their business with little recognition, as Annemarie has remarked. Among other things, this means that those living outside the immediate areas in which women are making their contribution do not get to learn about

them.

In interviews I have conducted with Papua New Guinean women, many report a desire to learn about women whom they perceive to be 'role models'. Rapid change in PNG as a result of modernization has meant that young women today live different lives from those led by their mothers and grandmothers. This is especially so for women living in PNG's towns and urban centres. As such, they are keen to discover how other women are managing the simultaneous demands of paid work, child-raising and domestic labour. Reading about western women is of little relevance for most Papua New Guinean women, most of whom are also grappling with these competing demands while trying to respect Melanesian values such as caring for extended family and confronting changing ideas about women's roles.

Thankfully, there are shifts taking place. For example, *Stella*, a new magazine for women in PNG and the Pacific, contains many articles about inspirational Papua New Guinean women. I have also met young people who are interviewing their mothers, aunts and grandmothers for the purpose of writing their life stories. These accounts will form an important record, becoming an integral part of PNG's history.

It is to this history – or perhaps 'herstory' – that we wish to add. And while offering us as readers the chance to see the world through the eyes and experiences of individuals, as a collection these biographies simultaneously allow us to observe broader patterns. As Annemarie has noted, the similarities between these women are most interesting. For example, the importance of parental support for girls' participation in education would appear to be a key ingredient for success. As Morobe politician, Luther Wenge, remarked when Dr Lenga Yuyutine Dopenu, one of the first Papua New Guinean women to become a doctor, died: "Her good parents saw the potential in her and made sure she went to school." <http://www.pinanius.org>

While education is important, it is by no means a guarantor that those whom it benefits will use what they have learned to benefit others. Another factor uniting the women

represented in this collection is that they have all drawn on the resources and positive input from which they have benefited to alleviate suffering in the lives of others. Whether working to understand deadly viruses in a laboratory at the Institute of Medical Research or establishing an organization to support families experiencing violence, these women display a profound commitment to improving the lives of their fellow Papua New Guineans. Despite differences in personality, training and experience, they embody the best of humanity, demonstrating in their everyday lives the intuitive understanding of the following line in the Hippocratic oath:

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.

In PNG, where surgeons and drugs are not always within reach, the grasp these women have on the art of warmth and sympathy is of immense importance. In what follows, we celebrate this gift and the intelligent, dedicated and brave Papua New Guinean women who share it.

Annemarie and I have been encouraged by the response of the *Papua New Guinea Medical Journal* to the series of articles that we have edited. We are pleased to note that the Journal is willing to accept additional contributions to this topic and we encourage others to write up their stories and those of their colleagues for submission to the Journal as individual articles. They should be submitted as contributions to the ongoing series on 'Women in health and medicine in Papua New Guinea'.

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