

Humble beginnings: from Lalaura to the board rooms of Papua New Guinea – the story of Dr Evelyn Lavu

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SUMMARY

This article explores the life and professional achievements of Dr Evelyn Lavu, the Director of the Central Public Health Laboratory at Port Moresby General Hospital in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The article documents Dr Lavu's journey from the happy village in which she grew up to her internationally recognized status as a leading pathologist of the Pacific region. Never limited by her gender, Dr Lavu has served as an executive committee member of the Medical Society of Papua New Guinea. She has also served as the President of the Women Doctors' Association of PNG. Exploring the factors that have enabled Dr Lavu's achievements, the article documents her quiet tenacity and confidence.

Dr Evelyn Lavu is a quiet and reserved person. Nevertheless, as the Director of the Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) at Port Moresby General Hospital, Evelyn is responsible for turning around its culture. Similarly, in her role as an executive committee member of the Medical Society of Papua New Guinea, Evelyn plays a key role in 'voicing the opinion of the medical fraternity' of Papua New Guinea (PNG). While she is a humble person, her efforts to lift standards at her workplace reflect another side of her – steely determination and outstanding professionalism. These strengths are also evident in her leadership of the Women Doctors' Association (WDA) of PNG. As the president of the WDA, a position she held for four years between 2008 and 2011, Evelyn worked tirelessly to inform women about the importance of having Pap smears. Cervical cancer was killing 80% of Papua New Guinean women who contracted the disease. Given that cervical cancer is preventable, Evelyn saw an opportunity to change things for the better. As a result of the media campaigns she instigated with the female doctors in PNG, an increasing number of Papua New Guinean women are having Pap smears, thus reducing the risk of their dying from cervical cancer.

To promote this cause, Evelyn met with

prime ministers, governors general and other dignitaries. According to this unassuming woman, "If you can achieve that you can achieve anything."

Childhood and family

Dr Evelyn Koruone Lavu began life in the rural village of Lalaura in PNG's Central Province. Her father, Lavu John Kaiulo, was a church pastor with a head for business. While his main role was working with the missionaries who came to live in the area, he earned extra money by meeting the visitors who arrived on the Talair planes, making copra and running the local cooperative shop. As the father of twelve children, Lavu's industrious approach to life was necessary and the Lavu children learnt this early. During their childhood, they were expected to contribute to the family's livelihood by working on the family's coconut plantations.

Evelyn was born in 1963, the ninth child in a family of five girls and seven boys. She says her mother, Wauta Gamini, was 'a typical village woman who cared for us all', but who was 'very strict as well'. Evelyn says girls and boys received the same treatment in their family. Some parents thought it unsafe for girls to go away to school because they would

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get pregnant and not complete their studies. However, Evelyn's father was forward thinking in this respect. Evelyn says:

"My dad was a very strong person in encouraging us to go to school. He made sure we went to school as girls, and he said [we] could be just as good as any man."

Some of Evelyn's happiest memories are of going 'crabbing' with her mother and other women in the community. She says that while the men did the deep-sea fishing, it was the women who visited the reefs and rivers to gather local fish and crabs that would serve as an additional source of protein for families. Describing this as 'great fun', Evelyn says it formed part of what was a 'very happy' childhood. A key part of this was having lots of children around her. Evelyn says:

"We all grew up with cousins that were very close; even today we are very close. We laughed a lot as children and when we meet we just giggle a lot like those happy times we see each other. It's still there. I grew up in a very good community."

To this day, Evelyn maintains strong links with her people and place of origin. The industriousness and commitment to others she learned as a child are evident in her yearly visits to conduct health checks among her community. Every Christmas, she visits and checks everybody, taking with her to Moresby the 'complicated' patients who need further treatment.

Education

As a girl and young woman, Evelyn also benefited from a good education. During her primary years she was educated in the village but secondary school was 'an hour's drive if the road is good'. So, in order to complete the education that her family believed in, Evelyn attended boarding school at a nearby station. This involved mixing with people from various cultures who spoke different languages. It was thus a big leap for Evelyn and her siblings. Though the boarding school was made from bush materials, the standard of teaching was very good. The teachers were expatriates from England and Evelyn says they were strict in regard to both discipline and appearance. The girls had to make their own skirts for their school uniform. They learned this from Mrs Jordan, who was a very good mathematics

teacher, but who also taught many valuable skills in home economics. Evelyn says:

"I really admired her because she not only taught but she was the principal's wife and when it was a rainy cold evening she would make Milo and bring it to the whole girl's dormitory just to encourage us to keep going."

Despite possessing a quiet confidence in her own abilities, the young Evelyn had no idea what career to pursue. She says she 'just went with the flow'. The boarding school went to year 10; after that students had to apply to continue their education elsewhere. When it was time to do so, Evelyn followed her older sister, Esther Lavu, and applied to Sogeri, then the leading high school in PNG. Esther Lavu is now a senior research fellow at the National Research Institute in PNG.

After completing her secondary education at Sogeri, Evelyn was encouraged by one of the teachers to apply for medicine. Evelyn says she 'always underestimated' herself and she 'thought medicine was a bit too hard for a girl like me coming from a village'. For this reason, she applied for dentistry. However, when Evelyn learned that a friend was studying medicine, she switched in order to join her. Despite this rather haphazard beginning, Evelyn was committed to 'helping people' and this commitment underpinned her decision first to do dentistry and then medicine. She says:

"In the village we grew up helping each other ... you help your auntie or older women, it's always there, it's part of your life. It becomes part of you."

Evelyn enjoyed her time at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), making good friends along the way. There were students from various countries in the Pacific such as Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Samoa, and Evelyn says they had wonderful 'cultural nights' together. Despite the opportunities for socializing, she remained focused on her studies. She was determined to complete the degree to please her parents 'who expected so much from us'. During this time, she also met her husband-to-be, Dr Mark Paul, a physician, whom she says is 'very good and not because he's my husband'. Together they have two children, the first of whom was born in 1988. Dr Paul is originally from Manus but

runs his own private practice in Port Moresby.

Graduating in 1987, Evelyn completed her residency at the Port Moresby General Hospital. She did her rural block in Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands Province.

A career in medicine

After completing her residency, Evelyn received encouragement from Professors Sirius Naraq and Isi Kevau to focus on internal medicine. However, she was reluctant to do this because her husband was going to work in the same area. Evelyn says she did not 'want to get in the way or compete with him'. Also, Evelyn wanted to combine her career with being a mother, having had her daughter by this time.

For a combination of reasons, including because she wanted to study something that was linked to a lot of disciplines, Evelyn decided to focus on haematology under Dr John White in Port Moresby. To do this, she became a registrar at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) in Sydney. Completing a one-year attachment, she joined the master's program in pathology and then 'streamed into haematology'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her evident capacities, Evelyn was singled out by one of her supervisors, Dr John Gibson. Dr Gibson says:

"RPAH has a long tradition in assisting in the training of developing haematologists from the Asia-Pacific region; only a minority, however, proceed to the RCPA fellowship. When Evelyn came to RPAH it was soon obvious that she possessed qualities that would, I believed, enable her to undertake advanced haematology training in Australia and sit for the fellowship. She adapted remarkably quickly to her new environment and was clearly dedicated to her ongoing education. Evelyn also possessed excellent people skills and interacted well with all members of our department. Not only notable is her success in the fellowship examination at the first attempt, but she also actively contributed to a research project on platelet antigens which was published in a peer-reviewed journal." (personal correspondence with the author)

For her part, Evelyn says she 'didn't know what she was getting herself into', but after four years she passed the exam. She is now

a Fellow of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA), a distinguished achievement.

Evelyn's second child, a son, was born in 1997, once she had completed the fellowship program.

Since her time in Sydney, Evelyn has continued to maintain strong links with international organizations, including those that support her work through the provision of technical assistance and funding. Grateful to AusAID for supporting her postgraduate education, she also mentions the World Health Organization, the Clinton Health Access Initiative, the Burnet Institute and the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria being among those who have supported her work, noting that in addition to direct support 'these organizations have enabled me to travel extensively to attend medical conferences representing PNG in countries within the Asia-Pacific region'.

After four years in Sydney, during which time her husband also completed further training and her daughter attended primary school, Evelyn returned to PNG and commenced work as a haematologist at the Port Moresby General Hospital. Though based in Moresby, she was consulting for the whole country. However, Evelyn left Port Moresby General because they reduced the salaries for laboratory staff and she 'didn't like discrimination'.

From Port Moresby General Hospital, Evelyn went to teach at the medical school at UPNG. During this time, Evelyn's family home was broken into and they lost many personal items, including their computers. This contributed to a sense of vulnerability, which Evelyn says also affected other academic staff. For instance, she says the poor working and security conditions meant that expatriate doctors were unlikely to work at UPNG, with few incentives to stay and almost no funds allocated to research. Moreover, during her time at UPNG, the curriculum changed and Evelyn did not agree with all the changes that were made.

As a consequence of these difficulties, Evelyn elected to leave UPNG to take up a role as the Director of the National Blood Service. She did this for two years before commencing her current role as the Director of the Central

Public Health Laboratory (CPHL). Evelyn has done a lot of different things during her career because, as she says, “I get bored doing one thing and if there’s no more challenge I move on.”

Challenges and achievements

Now well-established at CPHL, Evelyn (Figure 1) has great familiarity and insight into the enormity of the public health challenges in PNG. She says, “TB is a big problem, HIV is a problem, malaria too is a problem.” Despite these challenges she cites ‘human resources’ as the biggest difficulty she has encountered. Discussing this, she says:

“One of the issues is quality of work ... the culture is not there yet. So people do not do valid tests. That’s one thing I am pushing is quality. If you give a result is it true? Is it valid? Did you follow the steps? Those kind of things have to be really, really taught to the workers here in PNG. The commitment, it’s very difficult to get people committed. I’m a very committed person and I like people around me to show the same commitment.”

Evelyn mentions a culture of complacency

about work performance in which people who do not turn up for work suffer no consequences for absenteeism. She understands that such behaviour is influenced by the difficulty of people’s lives, including living conditions which see employees squatting in temporary homes with large numbers of other people and without access to tap water, for example. However, while recognizing the need for the PNG government to address the crucial matter of housing in Port Moresby, she wants to see the introduction of disciplinary committees so that employees are encouraged to pursue higher standards of commitment and professionalism.

Demonstrating her leadership in this area, Evelyn cites a turnaround in the workplace at CPHL as one of the highlights of her working life. She says:

“When I came to this organization, it wasn’t like this. Now people are working more than they used to. They are more organized and some staff are more committed, they’ve turned around. So that’s a highlight for me.”

Evelyn mentions she is proud to have participated in making improvements in the



Figure 1. Dr Evelyn Lavu.

diagnosis of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). She says that the techniques of using rapid tests are as 'advanced as anywhere in the world' and enable clients to be informed immediately of their status. CPHL monitors the quality of this service, but because of the quality of the training provided by CPHL the process has been decentralized.

Such decentralization is important for Evelyn, who is passionate about improving the lives of people in rural PNG. She believes women are 'naturally caring' and that if more women doctors were involved in public health, it would help to create change for everyone in the community, including the majority of Papua New Guineans who live outside PNG's towns and cities.

"Many doctors in general look at working in the best hospital, or the big hospital or the city hospital. I think we have to move away from there and look at the rural population and how well we can do that. Female doctors ... we need them in every field, but we need more females in

public health, I think, to drive their health indicators forward. Public health will make a big difference."

Despite the many challenges entailed in changing the system, Evelyn has chosen to stay in public health and to contribute to the improvement of health indicators across the country. She says while she does not have enough money to buy her own home, she cannot contemplate leaving for greener pastures because she would wonder, "Who is going to do this? Who is going to fill this gap?" As she says, "Whatever you do affects other people, not just you."

Evelyn, a committed supervisor of six female registrars in pathology, would like to see more women involved in research and teaching. She says, "I'd like to see these young ladies take off." Once they do so, she would be happy to hand over the reins. If the young women training under Dr Evelyn Lavu have learned anything from this accomplished and inspiring woman, the future of Papua New Guinea looks brighter already.