

The story of Francisca Trimas

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SUMMARY

Francisca Trimas is a 57-year-old nurse from the Madang Province of Papua New Guinea. This article documents her life as a rural health worker in Papua New Guinea. Since graduating from the Angau School of Nursing in 1976, Francisca has spent more than 30 years of her life working in the most remote parts of Papua New Guinea, from Kimbe to Hagen, Tari and the outskirts of the Eastern Highlands. In a country characterized by difficult terrain that makes access to basic health care very difficult, Francisca recalls the memorable moments in her life as a nurse dealing with life-threatening situations. From breech births to the occasional wild pig bite, Francisca reminisces on the joys and triumphs as well as the frustrations of working in the bush.

This narrative is a brief account of the life of Francisca Trimas, a nurse who has spent more than 30 years of her life serving in the remotest parts of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and still continues to work in health care.

Early life

Francisca Trimas was born in Maumbuan village in Bogia District in Madang Province on 1 November 1956. Her biological father had two wives. The first wife, Francisca's mother, had a total of fourteen children, nine boys and five girls. The second wife had two boys and a girl, so there was a total of seventeen children in the family. Life was tough in the village and it was difficult to raise so many children. Fortunately, an uncle named Petrus from Francisca's father's side of the family decided to adopt her. Petrus Ambale and his wife Anna adopted Francisca when she was only two months old.

Growing up, Francisca did not feel as if she was adopted; she was well taken care of and loved. When she was fifteen years old, Mrs Ambale revealed to Francisca that she was in fact adopted, but that fact made little difference in her life. She remembers her mother, Anna, as a very subservient wife, always obedient and hard-working. While her

father was at work, her mother earned income for the family by raising and selling pigeons. Francisca remembers a childhood spent swimming in the ocean and playing games – hopscotch and cops and robbers. Her parents were Catholic and very disciplined. As a child, she was taught never to steal. As she recalls, "My parents told me if I put my fingers into my mother or father's 'bilum' (bag) and take just 10 or 20 toea then I can do that to other people as well." Telling lies was also forbidden, and even the smallest fib was discouraged. As devout Catholics, Francisca's parents taught her that if she ever encountered anything difficult in life, she was to go down on her knees and seek the Lord in prayer. If she ever faced any problems, only God alone could help her.

Francisca's father was an aid post orderly. For much of her childhood, she and her family moved around the country accompanying their father to whichever aid post he was stationed. She described her father as timid and quite reserved. But as someone who loved people, he opened his home to strangers and treated everyone he met with kindness. Francisca recalls:

"He would carry me on his shoulders wherever he went and I would sit nearby

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and watch him work. I loved watching him talk to patients and the way they would respond to him. I was fascinated by the way he would draw injections and prepare medicine.”

Francisca decided that when she grew up she would be just like her father.

Education

Francisca started elementary school in 1962 at Kavieng Tee Primary School when her father, Petrus, was working at Kavieng Hospital in New Ireland Province. Their family home was conveniently located between the highway and the ocean so she and her siblings would spend afternoons swimming and playing by the beach. After three years in Kavieng, Petrus was assigned to go to work at a hospital in Rabaul, East New Britain Province. In Rabaul, Francisca continued her primary education. She had three brothers and three sisters but none of them wanted to go to school. They would leave home in the morning then escape during class time to the bushes or beach and later come home pretending they had been to school. Eventually their parents discovered what they were doing, but it was difficult to force them to go to school and so they just let them stay home. Francisca, however, was a smart girl and continued with her schooling. By 1969, she was back home in Bogia District, Madang, doing grade six at a local primary school. At this time Petrus was working in neighbouring Morobe Province.

In 1970 Francisca was accepted and enrolled at Divine Word High School – now Divine Word University in Madang – a high school developed and run by the missionaries of the Catholic faith. Most of those on the teaching staff were missionaries, laymen or priests, and all were professional and caring. Francisca believes she was blessed to have received a quality education at Divine Word, where she completed her high school education, finishing up to grade 10. In high school Francisca enjoyed mathematics, science, playing basketball and riding her bicycle around the mission grounds. She got along well with others but was quite timid, shying away from organized events such as school dances and other social gatherings.

When it was time to fill out her school leaver's form, Francisca applied for entry

into nursing at Angau School of Nursing in Lae (now the Lae School of Nursing). She remembered the example of her father. She admired the manner in which he talked with patients and she loved the joy that came with making other people happy. Nursing is what she had always wanted to do and she felt it was God's calling for her life. Nonetheless, Francisca realized her vocation would not be without difficulties. Her mother had told her nursing would involve leaving home and travelling away, up in the mountains or in a valley, depending on where she got posted.

On 21 January 1976, four months after PNG gained independence, 20-year-old Francisca Trimas graduated from Angau School of Nursing with a diploma in maternal child health (MCH).

Early career

Francisca's first post was at Kimbe General Hospital in West New Britain Province, where she worked in the child and maternal care unit. Although Francisca worked at Kimbe for only six months, she felt satisfied there because at last she was doing what her father had always done. As a first-time nurse she felt a sense of pride every time she wore her white dress, and an overwhelming urge to call out, "Look at me, I'm a nurse!"

After Kimbe, Francisca was sent to Simbu General Hospital in Simbu Province, where she worked for six months attending to maternal and child care needs. Thereafter, the Health Department sent Francisca to Mt Hagen General Hospital, Western Highlands Province, where she worked for three years. Later she was sent to Mendi Hospital in the Southern Highlands Province. However, Buyeabi Prison in Mendi made a request for a nurse and Francisca was called there to work instead.

For the following 9 years, Francisca worked for various government hospitals all around the highlands region before deciding it was time for a break. She went back home to Madang and stayed in her village for a number of months.

Fyantina

After residing in the village for several months, Francisca became restless, so she did what she knew best – she prayed for a job.

One night she had a dream. In her dream, it was graduation day all over again and she had been given a posting. The next morning, when Francisca told her friends about the dream, they predicted that perhaps there would be good news for her. A couple of days later, a white man, a Foursquare Church missionary, came to Francisca's village looking for her. "We have been looking for you", he said. "We've heard that you are a nurse and we want to send you to our mission station in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province."

"I'll go where you want me to go", Francisca responded.

In 1985 Francisca moved to Fayantina in the Henganofi District of the Eastern Highlands Province. She spent 14 years in this rural area. For 6 of these years she was officer in charge (OIC) of the Fayantina Health Clinic. As OIC, she ensured that her staff of four people – two nursing officers and two community health workers – were properly housed, that all equipment was in working order and that all supplies were in stock.

During her time as OIC, Francisca also carried out village birth attendant (VBA) training. These training sessions involved Francisca and two nursing officers entering a village and training mothers in health education. Francisca and her staff taught pregnant mothers about the importance of a proper diet, regular exercise and antenatal care. Francisca and her team conducted VBA training four times a year at the request of the village communities. While this training focused exclusively on antenatal care, in reality the information was used more widely. In rural PNG, older mothers, with the help of other women, often deliver babies without the assistance of skilled midwives.

From her time in Fayantina, the case of the wild pig is one particular incident that Francisca recalls clearly. One day, a nine-year-old boy was rushed to the clinic with his intestines spilling out. Early that morning, he had gone into the bush to pass stools. While he was squatting, a wild pig charged, ripping flesh from the boy's stomach. When the villagers brought the boy to Francisca, she swiftly administered two injections: tetanus toxoid to stop the poison of the pig bite and crystalline penicillin, an antibiotic to prevent infection. There was nothing she could do but use gauze and clean gloves to keep the contents

of the boy's stomach in his body. Francisca rang the health office in Goroka. Staff there arranged for a helicopter and Francisca and the boy were flown to Goroka. The boy was transferred straight to the operating theatre at Goroka Base Hospital. All the while the brave little boy did not so much as cry. Francisca asked him, "Yu pilim pen?" (Do you feel pain?), to which the boy replied, "Ye, tasol mi les lo krai" (Yes, but I don't want to cry).

It was in Fayantina that Francisca met her husband, Bernard, a local pastor of the Foursquare Mission. They got married on 3 January 1987. They have two daughters, Bethany and Bosnia. Their second-born was named after the European region that experienced civil war during the early 1990s. The name Bosnia was all over the news and Francisca liked the sound of it so she decided to name her daughter Bosnia.

Gouno

In 2000 Francisca left Fayantina and moved to Gouno in the Lufa District, another remote area of the Eastern Highlands Province. In Gouno she worked with a Faith Mission clinic. The Faith Mission, which has numerous clinics in rural PNG, is a Christian organization not affiliated with any church. Reflecting on her years working in Gouno, Francisca recalls one particular incident that she believes was an act of God. A mother had come in for delivery and it was a breech birth. Francisca did her very best and managed to get the baby out. However, to her surprise there was another baby still inside – one leg was poking out – it was another breech. By this time the mother was physically torn up and exhausted. As there was no assistance or hospital nearby, Francisca did the only thing she could. She got down on her knees and prayed. Immediately, a thought came to mind: "Let nature take its course." She promptly put on her gloves and stood ready to catch the baby. Right before her very eyes, Francisca saw the baby rotate inside the mother. The baby's head then came into view and the baby popped out unassisted. Francisca was overjoyed as she cleaned the babies and dressed the mother. Although not a trained midwife, Francisca had delivered two breech babies and saved their mother. It is miracles such as this that motivate Francisca to continue working in rural locations.

Francisca remembers another difficult

birth from her time in Gouno. More than five minutes had passed following delivery of the baby, but the placenta had not come out. Even after the lengthening of the umbilical cord and tightening of the stomach, there was still no sign of the placenta. Francisca tried to get the mother to empty her bladder by turning on a water tap, but this did not work. She catheterized the patient and attempted to induce the placenta manually, but there was still no placenta. Soon after, the placenta began to break and the mother started to lose a lot of blood. Her eyes were turning white. Francisca put the mother on a drip and called a doctor at Goroka Base Hospital. The doctor recommended the patient be brought immediately into town, so Francisca called Faith Mission headquarters and requested a medical evacuation. The mother and the baby were transported into Goroka, where they received life-saving treatment.

While working with the Faith Mission in Gouno, Francisca occasionally travelled to even more remote locations to deliver vaccinations and VBA training. She reached these areas aboard Mission Aviation Fellowship single-engine piston aircraft. Although the mission clinics in Gouno and other remote locations were well stocked with supplies, there was limited help for Francisca and she usually worked alone. But she knew that God was always with her.

Francisca was raised a Catholic but later she became a Seventh-Day Adventist. Her decision to leave the Catholic faith was a gradual one. It started years ago when she and other nurses would go into Seventh-Day Adventist communities to deliver VBA training. Along with the Adventist principles of observing Saturday as a day of rest and practising vegetarianism, Francisca was captivated by the hymns and choruses of the church. One particular song that prompted Francisca's decision to move was a song called 'Carry your candle'. Francisca says that the very first time she heard that song, she felt it was calling her home to the Adventist faith. In 2009, Francisca became a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist church. When Francisca told her husband about her move he responded, "Go ahead, I'll come later."

Francisca regards God as the great physician capable of healing all ailments. She whispers prayers while administering medication as she believes that drugs and

injections are avenues through which God heals the sick.

Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission

In 2005 Francisca decided it was time for a break and so she resigned and went to live in Bernard's village in Henganofi District. While in the village Francisca did not stop working. She continued to help women and children with their minor ailments such as headaches and fevers. Even without modern medicine, she utilized medicinal plants and prepared healthy nutritious meals for her village patients. When the medical OIC of Henganofi District Clinic learnt that Francisca was residing in the area, he instructed Francisca to get supplies from the clinic and administer these to sick people in her village when necessary. In her free time, Francisca would walk from village to village checking on the health of mothers, children and the elderly.

In 2009 Francisca received a telephone call from Nina Giheno, health director of the Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission (EHSM) of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Nina asked Francisca to travel to Goroka and give VBA training. While in Goroka, Francisca saw that EHSM wished to employ a nurse at its headquarters. She applied for the job and was successful. Francisca has been working with EHSM since 2009. She flies throughout the Eastern Highlands and Simbu Provinces on Adventist Aviation Services, giving immunizations and VBA training wherever there are Adventist churches and clinics (Figure 1).

Life as a rural health worker

In addition to helping mothers and their babies, during her time in the bush Francisca has treated patients suffering from asthma, burns, typhoid, malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea and fever. She has even attended to patients who have been attacked by animals. Francisca loves working in the bush where she has to be independent and self-reliant. Being away from civilization and the luxuries of the modern world has also shaped her faith. In her words:

"You really get to see the hand of God when you are out in the middle of nowhere ... every day you will see miracles because there is no distraction, just you and God."



Figure 1. Francisca Trimas.

When asked about her proudest achievements, Francisca replies, "I'm proud when I deliver babies because I help bring out a new life." Francisca starts talking to babies when they are inside the stomach, and when they are born she always welcomes them with the popular Adventist hymn 'Because He Lives'. Francisca derives an indescribable joy from holding newborn babies. She regards these moments as among the most special in life. Francisca has more than twenty namesakes scattered across the rural Eastern Highlands, baby girls who were named after her in appreciation of her work. In this way Francisca's legacy lives on – the kind nurse who lived and worked among the people of the Eastern Highlands.

Now 57, Francisca intends to continue

working for EHSM, serving God and His people, for at least 10 more years. If given the opportunity she would love to work in the bush in one of the coastal regions of PNG. She knows working in the bush is hard but she reminisces:

"Sometimes when I'm attending to sick patients, I can see my father Petrus doing the very same thing and it gives me great joy to know that out of all his children I am the one who made him proud, who followed his footsteps."

Despite the shortage of skilled workers and basic drugs, Francisca loves what she does by helping people in need. God willing, she intends to keep working as long as she is able.