

Newsletter

Winter 2026



pacific || leprosy

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Vanuatu

Jill and Dr Cunanan recently spent some time in Vanuatu working with the leprosy and public health teams to extend their preventative programme to hot spots in the second largest population in Vanuatu, on the island of Santo.

As well as training the teams who would be implementing the programme, they took part in community awareness sessions and assisted the doctors at the regional hospital to establish a system for taking biopsies from all new cases. This is important as the samples are sent to Christchurch where they are PCR tested for anti-microbial resistance to the drugs in leprosy treatment. Fortunately, no resistance to the main drug for leprosy treatment, rifampicin, has been detected, although some cases of resistance to dapsone, a secondary drug in the treatment, has been found in Kiribati. When this happens another drug is substituted.

Vanuatu is making great progress with its preventative programme and all six provinces have trained leprosy staff and have either implemented post exposure or total population prophylaxis, or have it scheduled for this year.



ABOVE:

A patient waits with Ann, our representative in Vanuatu, to have his biopsy taken.

RIGHT:

Kevin, the local TB/Leprosy manager displays the banner used in the community awareness meetings.



A classroom at Port Olry was made available for training local health workers.

News from Fiji

We are seeing an increase in leprosy cases in Fiji. This is not unusual once an efficient contact screening system is being followed and awareness of the facts about leprosy becomes more widespread.

In addition to these measures, a new skin clinic has opened in Nadi, making access to medical advice easier in the west of the main island (Viti Levu).

One leprosy case recently diagnosed in Nadi was a woman called Ueeata Bureiman who is 36 years old. She comes from Rabi

Island – a small island to the east of Vanua Levu. Ueeata was admitted to Twomey Hospital in Suva to establish her treatment regime. As you can see in the photos, her leprosy is quite advanced, and she runs the risk of developing disabilities caused by her leprosy.



The signs of leprosy on Ueeata's face, hands and feet show how high the bacterial load is, a big risk for disabilities such as lack of feeling in her hands and feet, possible deterioration of facial nerves affecting her ability to open and close her eyes and disintegration of the bridge of her nose.

Dr Api's Outreach Program

Dr Api is a very experienced leprosy consultant who now works under contract for the Fiji Ministry of Health. He recently travelled to Labasa to visit one of the leprosy patients and their family there. Lambasa is in the North Eastern province, on the northern island of Vanua Levu. He went to the house of Kamla Pradeep who continues to suffer effects from past active leprosy, and had recently returned from a stay in Twomey hospital for treatment for swelling and pain in her left hand joints. Kamla has a new room at the back of their house with an integrated toilet and shower room which is much more accessible for her as she relies on crutches and a wheelchair to move around.



LEFT: Dr Apisalome and Kamla in her new bedroom.

RIGHT: Showing the bathroom access from Kamla's room.

Statue of St Joseph receives a very special visit

In May 2023 we told the story of a wooden statue of St Joseph which had been moved from Twomey Hospital to stand in the chapel of the SMSM convent in Suva. The statue was created by Sven Ortquist whilst he was a patient on Makogai Island. When Makogai leprosarium was closed, it was shipped to stand in a bure at Twomey Hospital.

Recently, two daughters of Sven Ortquist, Esther and Helmy, contacted our Fiji representative, Kathey Foi as they were travelling to Fiji and wanted to find out more about their father's time on Makogai. Esther travelled from Wellington with her niece, and her younger half-sister Helmy



The sisters and their niece standing with the statue.



Esther sees her father's statue of St Joseph for the first time.

(who was celebrating her recent 50th birthday) flew in from Seattle.

Kathey reported that it was an emotional moment when they saw their father's work – Helmy had no memories of his carvings, but Esther remembered her father in hospital and his carvings. The sisters were unable to visit Makogai island but Kathey, who is completing her history masters thesis on Makogai, was able to give them a lot of information.

News of Solomoni

From Lambasa, Dr Api travelled back to Viti Levu to visit some of the patients near Nadi. He was joined by Dr Temea, who is studying in Suva before rejoining the leprosy team in Kiribati.

On their travels, they visited Solomoni who has recently completed his 12 month leprosy treatment. They found him selling green coconuts to passers by, looking healthier and happy.



Dr Apisolome (left), Solomoni and Dr Temea enjoying some green coconuts.

Kiribati

Kiribati continues to have a high number of leprosy cases, however our persistent hard work, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, is showing success as we are seeing a shift in the severity of cases diagnosed, meaning cases are being found earlier, and also a reduction in child cases which indicates a reduction in transmission. Overall cases are declining too, but at 154 cases last year in a total population of 120,000, we still have a lot to do.

Leprosy doesn't discriminate in terms of social standing, wealth, poverty or age. When our team was last in Kiribati they met two men who, in Kiribati terms, where the life expectancy is 55-60, were elderly, (in their early 70s), and had recently been diagnosed with leprosy. Fortunately it is at the less severe end of the scale, and they should make a full recovery after 6 months of treatment. It was just a coincidence that they came into the clinic at the same time. They enjoyed meeting and were able to discuss their treatment. Both were pleased that their families would be checked and given preventative doses of rifampicin over the next two years and would continue to be checked for a further 3 years after that. The man on the right was especially happy to have this reassurance as he has a young wife and 2-year-old child.



Information

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

We currently manage projects to assist those affected by leprosy in the following countries:

- Fiji
- Solomon Islands
- Tonga
- Kiribati
- Samoa
- New Zealand
- Vanuatu
- Tuvalu

Thank you so much to all of you who make this work possible through your interest and generosity.

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25 May 2026

Welcome to our winter newsletter. I hope you enjoy reading the stories which give a sample of the various aspects of the work the Pacific Leprosy Foundation does throughout the Pacific.

Our mission has two parts: "the eradication of leprosy and the continued care of patients and their families with disability, or social and economic disadvantage due to leprosy in New Zealand and the Pacific" We like to share with you stories that show you the human faces of leprosy and the huge impact the help you give has on the lives of patients and that of their families.

Of equal importance is the battle to eradicate leprosy. This newsletter features the programme we are assisting with in Vanuatu. While Vanuatu has lower rates of leprosy than many Pacific countries it is still a public health issue. With the help of the Foundation they are implementing an innovative programme to find all the cases in the community, give the treatment as well as checking and providing prophylaxis to their contacts. This involves a lot of hard work in a country where access to remote villages is difficult. We will keep you updated on progress as they implement this programme throughout the country.

Thank you all for your help and support to enable this vital work!

Yours sincerely

Jill Tomlinson
GENERAL MANAGER

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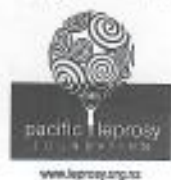
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