
The Sepik Tsunami 1998 – Death-reduction strategems

Professor John Pearn¹

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia¹

'NO GAT MAMA, NO GAT PAPA, NO GAT PIKININIOLGERA I LUS PINIS LONG SO LWARA' .

'MOTHER, FATHER, CHILDREN – ALL LOST FOREVER IN THE SALT WATER'.

A survivor's lament – Sepik Tsunami in 1998.

Tsunamis are catastrophic to littoral communities. They are a significant cause of drowning in equatorial nations of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Responses to tsunami threats and audits after devastating waves may reduce drowning deaths in the inevitable disasters of the future.

A little-publicised tsunami struck the Sissano Peninsula of the Sepik (north-west) coast of Papua New Guinea on the night of 17 July 1998. Sixteen villages were planed flat and some 8,000 citizens were drowned in the devastating wave.

Many who survived were carried by the wave several kilometres inland. As Surgeon General of the Australian Defence Force at the time, I was privileged to have a role in the emergency response; and subsequently in some aspects of the strategic rehabilitation over the ensuing year. Beside the success of the emergency international military and non-government organisation (NGO) response, family cohesion and post-disaster adoption of hundreds of surviving orphaned children were important in preventing secondary illness and death.

Rotary Australia provided resources for train-the-trainer programs for first aid. In the ensuing two years after the tsunami, St John Ambulance Papua New Guinea instituted programs of Emergency First Aid, for civilians at other Sepik coast villages, undertaken at village level. Although tsunamis cannot be prevented, and tsunami warning systems will remain an unobtainable goal in many high-risk communities for the foreseeable future – swimming, survival skills, life saving and first aid drills and skills it is predicted will reduce mortality; and will reduce morbidity among the survivors of the future.

Corresponding Author

Professor John Pearn

Chair ILS Ethics Committee – Member ILS Medical Committee

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia

PO Box 558

Broadway NSW Australia 2007

Email: j.pearn@uq.edu.au