

Working – But Not at Work

ANGAU Hospital, PNG

(1980 – 2010)

Past history

Royal Brisbane Hospital (RBH) assisted New Guinea to establish the first Papua-New Guinea (PNG) radiotherapy services in the '70s. ANGAU Hospital was originally named after the Australia New Guinea Army Unit which it set up in Lae during WWII.

ANGAU is an acronym for - Australia – New Guinea Army Unit.

After the War was over, the Health Authorities chose Lae to set up radiotherapy services because of its proximity to the majority of people who lived in the PNG Highlands. The PNG capital of Port Moresby was too far south and was isolated from the rest of PNG by the surrounding mountains.

Lae was also an Australian army base during the War and was assisted by the American Allies. The Americans built an airstrip just out of Lae. It was big enough to land the largest airship and is still there today. Despite its size, it's not used anymore for international or national flights. There are now only domestic flights to Lae and the locals thought the American airstrip was too far out of town. Instead, they use a smaller airstrip located right on the edge of town.

Why the radiation services were at Lae

The use of Lae for the radiation therapy services was because it was handy to where many of the cancer patients lived as highland tribal people located north along the east coast. The natives were habitually chewing betel nuts and they smoked heavily. Head, neck and lung cancer for men and gynaecological cancer for women were the most prevalent radiation therapy cancer cases.

RBH established in the '70s a small compact radiation therapy centre there. It had a Cobalt-60 teletherapy unit, a low kilovoltage X-ray machine and some radioactive caesium-137 sources available for gynaecological treatments. But by early 1980, RBH decided that they no longer wanted to support the ANGAU hospital centre. POWH agreed to take over from RBH and support the PNG radiation therapy centre with seconded staff working in Lae for 6-12 months. Little did we think about what responsibilities it entailed, especially for the radiation therapists.

The PNG Government provided the therapists accommodation during their stay in Lae and one of our physicists annually visited the ANGAU hospital for a week to check both treatment machine calibrations. They also ensured proper functioning and safe use of the radiation therapy equipment and provided data updates sheets for the radiation therapists to use for treatment and planning dose calculations. It was all very basic and provided a valuable service for a limited number of PNG cancer patients.

My first physics visit

I first went to the ANGAU radiotherapy centre in 1979. Before leaving for Lae, I received a number of calls from the PNG radiation oncologist, Dr John Niblett. He had made all the necessary PNG arrangements for this first visit. Since I intended to follow my standard practice - measure everything and assume nothing, I had to take much more equipment than would ordinarily be needed. ANGAU hospital had no physics equipment for me to use. I had to bring all the physics gear needed.

One of the early rules we learnt was to ensure Government payments were finalised before leaving Sydney. Otherwise, any refunds for expenses would unlikely be paid retrospectively. Dr Niblett had to obtain approval before my visit and had purchased the accommodation, air tickets and \$1,000 of excess baggage!

As well as packing all my measuring equipment and maintenance tools, there were some spare parts for Niblett's car and a bottle of 'Black Label Johnny Walker' whisky (for us to share after a long day at work!). Arranging an anti-malaria injection was another 'must do' before leaving.

First Impressions

Travelling from Sydney to Lae was a long one-day effort with air flights to Brisbane, another Brisbane to Port Moresby and then a local flight from Port Moresby to Lae.

I still clearly remember that first visit. It was a small town surrounded by tropical forests and the highlands in the distance. That and the weather was like I had previously experienced in Northern Queensland. Yet, the township and hospital buildings were like stepping back into the fifties with their weatherboard and fibro homes built on stilts.

As I walked towards the hospital from my hotel, I noticed that the local New Guinea men walked well ahead of their wives and children. The wives seemed to carry all their belongings on their head and back while the husband had nothing. A sign of their culture that showed who was the boss, I presume – or was he?

Then, as I reached the collection of trees just near the hospital entrance, I could see dozens of groups of people lying around under the trees. They were just sitting doing very little. My first thought was to think that all these people were lazy layabouts. Or maybe they just didn't have any work to earn a living?

Neither was correct. I found out later that streams of mountain people came down from the highlands to receive medical care at ANGAU hospital. The family came with them to support their sick relative. The family would find a tree to set up home under it and would take it in turns for one of them to go

into the hospital and care for their sick relative. One would nurse the patient and, in case help was needed, sleep on the floor next to their relative receiving treatment. I had full admiration for these families. They are lovely people.

But not all of the PNG locals were 'lovely' people. The locals generally lived in two-storey homes for a good reason. The ground floor was for living at home by day. But, at night when they retired, they would climb the stairs and lock a gridded gate at the top of the stairs before retiring to the bedroom. Burglaries by the so called 'rascals' commonly occurred at night. No one dared go downstairs if they heard the 'rascals' were there.

As for the weather, it was the typical tropical uncomfortable humid and hot temperature. It had a regular pattern of being fine in the morning and then thunderstorms finishing with teeming rain in the afternoon. I breathed a sigh of relief as I entered a nice cool air-conditioned radiotherapy department at ANGAU Hospital.

Radiotherapy at ANGAU Hospital

As I went past the radiation therapy secretary, I entered a nice clean, spacious waiting room in front of me. The doctor's consulting room was on the right, the control and cobalt-60 treatment machine in front of me and a low-kilovoltage superficial treatment machine on my left. Royal Brisbane Hospital had designed it all very nicely. Dr Niblett and two of our POWH radiation therapists greeted me. I met two of the local staff who were receiving training on how to treat the patients, a very happy nurse and the clerical staff.

Dr Niblett was trained as a radiation oncologist in UK. He suffered from poliomyelitis when he was young and could only walk with the aid of two sticks. He had a habit of yelling at the top of his voice for when he needed something in the consulting room. But, at other times, he was quiet in nature and cracked plenty of subtle jokes during our after-hours drink or two or three or so....

I am not sure why Dr Niblett decided to take up work at Lae. But he seemed quite happy with it despite always having to work hard for money, equipment and support facilities for his radiation therapy services there. He had settled into Lae with his wife and a large family of boys. He had obviously worked very hard to get the radiation therapy back on track by the time I arrived. It was closed for quite a few years after RBH finished their support services. Sadly, Dr Niblett's wife left and went back to UK soon after arriving. The sons decided to stay with their father.

And so, to work I went. The Cobalt-60 treatment machine was well worn (but still solid despite its age). It was due for a radioactive Co-60 source change. But that meant securing a considerable amount of money from PNG Health department who found it difficult to find sufficient funds to purchase a box of syringes!

Fortunately, the number of patients requiring treatment was not huge and the services could continue even though the treatment time was getting longer and longer as the years went by. Each year I visited there, I provided new data sheets for the next 12 months. There were separate data sheets printed out for each month, corrected for the decay of the radioactive source and time required to provide the prescribed dose, depending on the treatment depth. If only, radiotherapy was that simple today!

Elsewhere, things were a little rough. The X-ray output for the low kilovoltage machine erratically varied as the hospital spasmodically drained the high voltage power needed for other services. Otherwise, everything was in order there.

Then it was time to visit the room where women were treated with radioactive caesium-137 sources for gynaecological cancer. Nearby, was the storeroom where the radioactive sources were kept when not in use. The storeroom was in good order. The wipe test showed no radioactive leakage of the sources.

But what I was aghast when I saw it, was the room where the PNG ladies were housed for their radioactive Caesium-137 gynaecological treatment. They were treated in beds away from the main ward and separate in a little tinned roof shed. You had to literally walk across a short connecting deck from the main hospital building to enter their patient bedroom. The only good thing about this room, it was air-conditioned.



A Special Place for Me

It was an unexpected event. But I was ever so glad it happened.



Figure 21.1 The Commonwealth War Memorial in Lae, PNG.

One of our radiation therapists owned a little mini-moke VW car. She offered to provide me a tour of Lae. We were doing well and had visited almost all parts of Lae when we came to the last tour stop. It was the Commonwealth War Memorial. The Australian Government recovered all the WWII soldiers who were buried in graves all around PNG` and relocated them to the War Memorial in Lae. Fallen soldiers from other Commonwealth forces were buried there too.

I knew that my father was wounded in Tobruk, North Africa, during WWII. He was sent back to Australia to recover. Then, after recovery, he was shipped off with the Australian forces to defend PNG against the invading Japanese forces heading towards Australian soil. My Father was killed either during or soon after the Australian forces landed at Finschhafen, 80 km from Lae. I was born in 1941 and knew very little detail about his death. Having the opportunity to walk through the Lae War Memorial, I could not help but wonder whether I could ever find my father's grave there. I proceeded to walk up and down the rows and read each tombstone. It was a staggering miracle. Three rows back, I came upon his grave and read the message on it. I was standing in front of my father's grave. which said:



Figure 21.2 Unknown soldier paying respects to Leonard Douglas Oliver's first grave near Finschhafen.



WX5265 SERGEANT

L. D. OLIVER

2/28 INFANTRY BATTALION

20 OCTOBER 1943 AGE 30

TOO DEARLY LOVED TO EVER BE
FORGOTTEN

SWEETEST MEMORIES

Niblett's trimaran yacht

It was not very long after arriving in Lae for when Dr Niblett took me down to see his beloved trimaran yacht. He said he had bought this yacht for a good price and was “doing it up”. That sounded interesting.

But it was not nicely moored down at the Lae Yacht club. It was sitting on blocks and located at the end of the Town's domestic airstrip. You could clearly see it as our plane came down to land and skimmed over the top of this ugly yellow yacht!

The trimaran yacht remained at the end of the runway for three or so years. And, each time I returned to Lae, I would check from the plane's cabin window to see whether the yacht was still there. Dr Niblett had local PNG 'boys' working on it. Every year, I would go with him down to the yacht and check how the work was progressing. And every year the boys were doing the same thing – sanding the woodwork inside the cabin! And every year, I would be commandeered to help too!

I was amazed when landing the fourth year. The ugly yellow yacht was not at the end of the Lae runway. At last! It must be finished.

Yes, it was finished but, no, it was not nicely moored in the water. It was in the backyard of Dr Niblett's house and his sons were repairing it. Dr Niblett explained that they had finished the work on the yacht and had transferred it to moor at the yacht club. But soon after that, a big storm passed through Lae, tore the yacht off its mooring and damaged it on nearby rocks. I had devoted three years of short-term labour helping with getting that yacht seaworthy. I was not about to start all that again!

The years went by and it was getting towards the end of the eighties when I received a phone call from Dr Niblett. He said that he had finally decided to finish his work in PNG. He was taking up a radiation oncologist appointment at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, Western Australia (my old hospital where I started my career in 1962!).

I asked him what did he intend to do with his beloved yacht? He told me that he still wanted to keep it – he intended to sail it to Perth. He and his sons had set sail on the first leg from Lae to Pt Moresby,

only to be lost for a week with nobody knowing what had happened. They had struck a bad storm and, luckily, had been able to shelter from the storm in the lee of an island.

The yacht had still suffered some storm damage, though and they had to limp their way slowly to Port Moresby. It was placed up on dry-dock to repair it once more. Niblett had no alternative but to leave the Yacht in Port Moresby with his sons. He had to start his new work in Perth. This yacht was becoming a long saga. What would happen to it next?

Yes, there was a next. I will try to summarise here. The yacht remained in Port Moresby for some years until eventually Niblett returned and joined his sons to sail the yacht from Port Moresby to Perth. In lifting the yacht off the dock and back into the harbour, it was dropped and damaged again. Not to be denied, Niblett flew back to Perth. He had talked his sons into getting a skipper and, together, they were to sail the yacht to Perth as soon as possible.

The sons and their skipper eventually set sail and negotiated the shallow waters and tides around the tip of Australia and the Gulf of Capricorn. They sailed past Darwin okay and were heading down past the Kimberleys in WA when they struck a fierce monsoon storm. The yacht had to be once again docked for repair in Broome. I thought the story was ended.

But no, there's more. I later returned to Perth in the early 90's to attend a conference. Being my hometown where my family lived, I took a drive around the Claremont – Nedlands suburbs. Some of the roads have panoramic views across the very wide, gentle flowing Swan River. I was looking at the river below where the Claremont baths used to be. There, in amongst a collection of moored yachts was an ugly yellow trimaran. It had to be Dr Niblett's yacht!

PNG Radiotherapy on 'Life Support'

When Dr Niblett left Lae, the treatment of radiotherapy patients came to a halt. I heard that there was a brief respite when an Indian radiation oncologist was appointed. He stayed for a while but then left again, leaving all the staff working there in suspended animation. The trainee PNG therapists remained on the payroll for more than ten years with no patients to treat and no visiting staff from POWH.

In about 2004, I received a phone inquiry from a retired Melbourne businessman. He said he had a small fund-raising group interested in helping PNG cancer patients. He had heard that the PNG radiotherapy department at Lae was run-down, without a doctor and without any Australian support staff to help them get their cancer services going again. I explained that it was crucial to find a radiation oncologist to permanently work in the ANGAU Hospital and, after such a long time, he would need to find some experts to check out all the equipment, calibrate them and re-establish a radiation safe place for patients and staff.

Not wanting to take on this 'mission impossible' task so late in my working life, I did want to help in some way. I explained that they would at least have to find funds to purchase a replacement cobalt-60 radioactive source for the treatment machine. And, because of the machine's age, they should consider buying a new telecobalt treatment machine too. I suggested that one possible solution to muster help, would be to get the PNG Government to apply for equipment assistance from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But to do that, PNG would need to pay a small fee to become an International Member and abide by the IAEA rules of safe practice. I suggested a few

people who may be able to help him with medical physics and technical help if he could raise the necessary funds. One of those I suggested he should contact, was Dr John Niblett!

It was some time before I heard any further news about PNG radiation therapy. But things were apparently slowly happening. The Director of Radiation Oncology at my Royal North Shore Hospital, the late Dr Graeme Morgan AM, became involved. He had started a solo effort in visiting and helping a number of disadvantaged radiotherapy services in Asian hospitals. The ACPSEM physicists had joined forces with Dr Morgan by establishing a voluntary Asia-Pacific medical physics support group (called Asia-Pacific Special Interest Group, APSIG) headed by Simon Downes and assisted by Anna Ralston. Peter Francis, the local agent for cobalt-60 teletherapy machines, offered a special price. It included his time, work on the installation and travel expenses as free of charge. He removed the old and installed the new telecobalt machine in the old treatment room.

Everything came together and 'mission impossible' was possible. They had managed to convince Dr Niblett to return back to Lae as the resident radiation oncologist. Simon Downes arranged one of his physicists, Dr Tony Knittel, to volunteer for the physics work. Tony made annual visits as the medical physics expert and technical support for ANGAU from around 2008 to until he retired.



The PNG Government and its community should be indebted to the many Australians who helped to re-establish the country's one and only cancer centre. It is a wonderful example of how Australian volunteers offer their services and money to help disadvantaged Asia - Pacific Hospitals.

In looking back over all those years, the story of that ugly yellow yacht seems to describe Dr John Niblett's lifetime luck. He attracted bad luck and hardship many times in his lifetime. But, despite that, he did so much good for his PNG patients.

Sadly, Dr John Niblett died late in 2018 and PNG is once more seeking a doctor to work at the ANGAU hospital.

Extract from the memoirs of:

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