



Just 18 months after being shot in the spine and paralysed, Verena undertook the great task of an Everest Base Camp trek.

# Committed to the cause



Attending to village locals.



Patients of Rumginae Hospital's maternity ward.



General ward of Kiunga Hospital.



Verena's temporary village home.

Verena Doolabh is an adventurous young doctor who likes a challenge – her most recent of which included gruelling treks through muddy jungle and steep ravines to tend to patients in Papua New Guinea's remote villages.

WORDS AND PHOTOS LUCY E. COUSINS

After being patched up by doctors when she accidentally sliced three tendons and an artery on her left arm, New Zealand-born Verena Doolabh thought, "I could do this". A few years later upon finishing her medical degree, the intrepid young doctor found herself posted to rural Australia, and loved it so much she moved here permanently. After a near-fatal shooting while on holiday in Jordan in 2006 left her paralysed from the waist down, Verena spent 18 months teaching herself how to walk again. Last year, upon her recovery, she trekked to Everest Base Camp to raise money for Spinal Cure Australia and this year, she ventured

into the largely unpenetrable and wet Star Mountains and Fly River regions of Papua New Guinea's remote Western Province with Australian Doctors International, undertaking tough and punishing expeditions in order to reach patients in remote villages. "I like a challenge," the 30-year-old doctor says by way of explanation. "I don't like doing routine things all the time." Her three-month volunteer assignment in the region saw her taking a 12-day trek in the North Fly District over mountains, through thick and muddy jungle, along landslides, and across steep ravines to visit patients who barely have even basic health services.

**Some of your earliest medical posts were to remote communities in Australia. How did you find that?**

I did what's called a rural relief term, which is where they send you to a remote area to relieve the doctors out there - and I absolutely loved it! In a big hospital, there is a strict hierarchical system, as a junior doctor you don't get much control over what's happening and you don't get to make a lot of decisions. In a rural community you have a lot more responsibility and you have to make your own decisions. I also enjoyed the country and the type of patients you get in those areas.

**While you were holidaying in the Middle East, you were involved in a shooting. What's the story there?**

In 2006 I decided to go overseas for a holiday. Halfway through, I was sight-seeing with a tour group in downtown Amman, Jordan, and out of nowhere a local man just started shooting at us. He shot six out of the

eight people in our tour group and one person unfortunately died. I was shot in the spine and was paralysed from the waist down.

**Were you worried that you might not walk again?**

Initially when it happened I thought I was going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, but fortunately when the surgeon came to see me he said that my spinal cord looked intact, so it was likely to be temporary. It was a huge relief. He told me that I would never be 100 percent, but that I should make a good recovery. After two weeks in hospital, where I had surgery to have the bullet removed, I flew back to Australia to go through rehabilitation. From then on I spent every waking moment trying to get better.

**So the experience didn't put you off travelling?**

No, not at all. It is very much like riding a bike; if you fall off, you just have to get

back on. I would hate to be terrified of travelling; I think it would change me as a person. When I was in hospital, the King of Jordan came to visit. He was very apologetic and couldn't believe that this had happened in his country. He paid for all my medical treatments and flew my parents over to be with me. A year later when I decided to go back to Jordan to put closure on the whole thing, he paid for that trip too. I went back to the site where it had happened, and I went to the hospital to visit all the staff that had looked after me.

**In March 2008, 18 months after you were paralysed, you trekked to Everest Base Camp – what a feat...**

Yes, my doctor had told me that I should expect a recovery period of 18 months, so to mark the 18-month anniversary I decided I wanted to trek to Everest Base Camp to raise money for Spinal Cure Australia. You know, when you are faced with the possibility of being in a wheelchair or having a disability,

suddenly you decide 'well, I want to do everything I possibly can'. So, you set yourself extreme goals.

**What was the hardest aspect of the climb?**

The first week of trekking was actually fine. We did it over two weeks with acclimatisation days and were often only trekking for five or six hours a day. I didn't have any problems whatsoever; it was only around day eight or day nine that things started to get really tough. By that stage, my legs were getting tired and the terrain also became more difficult. There are a lot of boulders that you have to scramble over and one of the deficits that I have is balance, so this was tough.

**You recently spent three months with Australian Doctors International (ADI) in some of the most isolated areas in Papua New Guinea...**

Yes, a few months after I got back from Nepal I volunteered with ADI because I

*"I would hate to be terrified of travelling; I think it would change me as a person."*

had heard about the state of health in the Western Province, the most remote part of Papua New Guinea. I wanted to go and see what I could do to help.

**What did a regular day involve?**

Half my time was spent in Kiunga, where I was based at the local hospital. The other half (which I enjoyed more) involved me trekking to remote villages. I also treated 21 people in a community of leprosy patients. ADI has been involved there for a while now, so a lot of patients had been on anti-leprosy drugs for eight months and have made some significant improvements. That was really great to see.

**How isolated are these villages?**

To reach some of them we had to travel

14 to 16 hours by boat or go on long treks through some pretty rough terrain. Some were so remote that I had to take a helicopter to get there, often with long treks from the drop-off point. Another trip involved riding on the back of a tractor for five hours. Some of the village 'aid posts' were no more than tiny dilapidated shacks.

**Now that you are back in Australia, what is your next adventure?**

I haven't decided yet! I just moved to Orange, NSW, and I will be out here for a year working in the drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. But as for my next adventure, I need some suggestions! Everest Base Camp was an amazing experience, and Papua New Guinea was just unbelievable. What can I do to top them?