

# SEA CHANGE OF A DIFFERENT KIND: COUNTRY GP LENDS A HAND IN REMOTE PNG



*Bruce and Gayle Slonim in New Ireland, PNG*



PHOTOS: AUSTRALIAN DOCTORS INTERNATIONAL/GAYLE SLONIM

*On a banana boat in New Ireland, PNG*

**F**or Dr Bruce Slonim, a typical day in 2014 began with a bumpy banana boat ride to treat villagers in one of Papua New Guinea's most isolated areas.

Bruce and his wife Gayle, from Corowa NSW, spent the best part of the year volunteering in PNG's remote New Ireland Province with the non-profit organisation Australian Doctors International (ADI).

"There are very few doctors in New Ireland and the health facilities are in dire need," said Bruce.

For two weeks of each month, the Slonims would set out from the provincial capital with a team of local health workers - including two dentists, a physiotherapist, HIV nurse, eye nurse, maternal child nurse and logistics officer - to treat patients who would otherwise never see a doctor or a hospital. The Integrated Rural Health Patrol teams, made possible by a partnership between ADI and the New Ireland provincial government, spend three days at each of the Province's

27 remote health centres - their arrival announced to villagers across the local radio.

"It was difficult to get to some of these places," said Gayle, a teacher by profession and logistics extraordinaire on patrol. "We'd boat-hop along the coast from village to village, taking all our fuel, dry food, medical equipment and even our mattress with us. If we were lucky, we'd catch a fish for dinner on the way."

In a country with an estimated one doctor per 17,068 people, and where 85 per cent of the population live in rural and remote areas, the patrol teams are desperately needed. PNG ranks lower than Bangladesh and Myanmar on the UN's Human Development Index, and according to the World Health Organisation, has the worst health outcomes in the Pacific. Maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world and diseases like tuberculosis, malaria and pneumonia are commonplace.

“We would see six to ten people a day with acute malaria when we were on patrol,” said Bruce. “The really hard part is that you get treatable, preventable diseases that are almost never seen elsewhere.”

The poor infrastructure and health facilities mean the ADI doctors and local health workers have to make do with very little.

“Things like pain relief in childbirth are unheard of,” Bruce said. “Night deliveries are done with torches or kerosene lamps and most of the health centres don’t even have water.”

Despite the challenges, the Slonims say they’ve seen their work is making a difference.

“On our first trip in 2012, we did mainly primary care because we were treating people who had never seen a doctor before,” said Bruce. “It’s encouraging to see we’ve been able to do a lot more preventative health work in the villages this time around. We’re now getting

people coming along for regular wellness checks to test things like blood sugar before they get really sick; and we’ve gone from just doing tooth extractions to talking about oral health and the risks of chewing betel nut, for example.”

“Island work is hard and can be very frustrating but there is always something that happens out of the blue, or in the most remote corner of the jungle, that makes it a fulfilling day,” Bruce said. “We feel incredibly privileged to have been able to work in New Ireland like this and we hope to go back again.”

ADI is currently looking for volunteer doctors and health managers to work in PNG on 6-12 month assignments. Visit the ADI website, [www.adi.org.au](http://www.adi.org.au) for information about the terms and conditions.

**May Slater**

*Australian Doctors International*



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*Bruce and Gayle Slonim with the local health team in New Ireland, PNG*



*Dr Bruce Slonim in New Ireland, PNG*