



PNG's eye health heroes

By Bob McMullan

I have been reading with dismay the [sad stories](#) of the impact of PNG government budget decisions on the hospital sector.

It seems to me we are short of positive stories about what development assistance can achieve.

Therefore, it was a pleasure to be reminded of a positive experience within the PNG hospital sector which continues to deliver real life-changing assistance to citizens of the country.

During an official visit to PNG during my time as Parliamentary Secretary I

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observed one bright spot at the Port Moresby Hospital, the PNG Eye Care Centre.

This was a bright and cheerful place which was enabling people to overcome unnecessary visual impairment and helping them to enjoy more productive and satisfying lives.

It was a particularly satisfying scene as the Eye Care Centre was receiving significant assistance from the new Australian government program, the Avoidable Blindness Initiative. This additional funding had allowed for the refurbishment of the Centre, the opening of five more centres around the country and the establishment of a National Specs Supply System.

The ongoing work of the responsible local NGO, PNG Eye Care, continues to receive significant funding from the Brien Holden Vision Institute.

One of the most satisfying features of this success story is that the Port Moresby Vision Centre now generates sufficient income to be self-sustaining, fund outreach programs and provide free spectacles to children.

Therefore, it was a great pleasure for me to see one of the workers I met there recognised at the recent [International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness General Assembly](#) as an [Eye Health Hero](#).

Dr Jambi Garap was recognised for her pioneering work in tackling health and social barriers and as a relentless advocate within the government and the health sector for the development of sustainable eye care systems within PNG.

But for me she is even more a symbol of the positive impact that our development assistance can have when intelligently applied.

Dr Garap was not the first PNG Eye Health Hero. Dr David Pahau, an ophthalmologist working in the East Sepik, was recognised previously for his work, particularly in performing more than a thousand cataract surgeries in some of the most isolated places in PNG.

It is great to have the opportunity to recognise the achievements of outstanding individuals.

It is even better to be able to highlight the positive benefits that a program like the Avoidable Blindness Initiative can achieve for very little money when it is used to empower local people to gain the skills necessary to assist people and have the resources to apply those skills to help those in great need who would otherwise be needlessly blind or vision impaired with all the consequences of that for individuals and their families.

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About the author/s

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Bob McMullan has had a long and distinguished career in the Australian Parliament as one of Australia's pre-eminent Labor politicians. He is a former Parliamentary Secretary for International Development (2007-2010) and Executive Director for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. He is now Adjunct Professor at Crawford School of Public Policy and a Visiting Fellow at the Development Policy Centre.