

# GP PULSE

THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

## **Samoan Tsunami**

College Fellow Susie Moller  
on the frontline

.....

## **Health Cheque**

Gareth Morgan prescribes  
more primary care

.....

## **Research**

Combining vocational and  
academic training

.....



# Samoan Tsunami Frontline

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On Wednesday September 30 2009, GP Susie Moller was enjoying a family holiday in Samoa. To celebrate Samoan partner Clare's fortieth birthday, the Auckland RNZCGP Fellow had rented a couple of lagoon-side bungalows at Taumaesina, a village near Apia, for family and friends.

"We were having a lovely time, swimming and relaxing..." Susie says. Her parents, seasoned travellers, had fallen in love with Samoa, saying it was the most gorgeous place in the Pacific. Susie was in the shower when the earthquake hit at 6.48 am. "It wasn't

like the earthquake simulator at Te Papa. You couldn't stand up. I was staggering. The earthquake kept going, over and over again."

All awake, they got together to discuss what to do. The water in the lagoon, normally so beautifully still, started churning. Wearing their pyjamas they drove inland, headed for the hills and waited for news. "The roads were filled with cars and people running." After a few hours, came news it was safe to return to the coast; but that the tsunami had torn through Upolo's South Coast, wreaking terrible devastation.



*GP Susie Moller (right) with partner Clare and daughter Petra*



Susie headed for Apia's Moto'otua Hospital's emergency department, taking the medical kit she always travels with. "News had reached hospital staff via mobile phones. They were already swinging into action. They gave me a gown and everything and I helped prepare the space for triage." In addition to the Samoan hospital staff and Susie, a Melbourne emergency registrar and two doctors from the *Survivor: Samoa* TV programme set had arrived to help.

The roads from the South were out for a while, then pick-ups and utes loaded with injured and dead people started streaming in and the medicos feverishly triaged everyone. The first patient Susie saw—a dead two-year old girl—further galvanised her. "There was nothing we could do to save her. She looked exactly like my daughter Petra. Her mother's grief was so horrific and tragic. I thought there but the grace of God go I."

Susie was able to save her next patient, a pregnant 24-year-old who had lost her two-year-old and her baby. "Just miserable." A morgue was set up in the chapel. "Every-one was coming to the hospital. Family members looking for loved ones. Samoans and tourists. It was just devastating." By eleven pm, the dark and damaged roads stopped further victims from coming in.

Susie says the Samoan hospital team, particularly a paediatrician, were "superb". Lack of equipment was a problem. In particular, the hospital had only one ventilator, which a sixteen-year-old boy was put on. For the others, lots of oxygen, steroid injections and intravenous antibiotics were employed. Many had almost drowned in turbulent, sandy water. "A ute would arrive with eight critically injured people and twenty minutes later another would arrive."





Neck braces were also in short supply. “We had to do MacGyver type stuff. Make irregular neck braces out of cardboard and things.” There were so many critically injured people; some victims with serious wounds had to wait until the next day for treatment.

Thursday saw an early morning start and another full-on day. At about two pm, a thoroughly resourced medical team arrived from Australia. Their equipment included six portable ventilators.

Susie has a lot of Samoan patients at her Freeman’s Bay practise and keeps track of how tsunami victims are recovering and how reconstruction is going that way. “Lots of Samoans lived on the breadline before the tsunami. Health problems are only going to get increasingly worse until their basic infrastructure is returned.” She is hopeful about reconstruction.

*Some survivors headed for the hills (above); others were living in tents by the sea (below)*



“Samoans are such generous, lovely people. They have strong families and faith. They all chip in together and have enormous pride in their villages.” But she’s worried about local politics, particularly where the aid and reconstruction money is going. “It seems some of it isn’t going to the right places.”

“The Samoan medical team is fantastic, but they are short staffed in every respect.” Susie says the Red Cross are probably the best charity to donate to. “They are based right next to the hospital, and all the locals too were taking gifts of supplies to them.” She advises GPs who want to help Samoa to take their families to Samoa on holiday. “Be tourists and spend money. They need tourist dollars.”

Although Susie had formative experience working in demanding emergency rooms, these two days were something else. “It was terrible. The relentless volume of grief. But it was great to be able to help. People were so grateful.” I find it upsetting just listening to Susie’s recount. I thank her for sharing the experience with *GP Pulse*. “I really didn’t tell anyone about it. I didn’t want to talk to people about it when I first got back. It’s good to talk about it now though.”

Susie and Clare plan to take their daughters to live in Samoa for a year sometime during the next three years; Susie hopes to work or volunteer at Moto’otua Hospital’s emergency department.

Currently a GP at Freeman’s Bay Medical Centre in Auckland and a RNZCGP Fellow, Susie Moller graduated in 1994. She worked in emergency departments in Christchurch, Auckland (Starship) and Charing Cross London before returning to general practice in New Zealand in 2002. “I prefer the breadth and depth and long term relationships of being a GP in New Zealand. It’s also the place to bring up a family.”



*Two weeks after the tsunami: distributing medicine (above), hospital treatment (below)*



*Pictures of Samoa published with thanks to the Ministry of Health. The College also thanks members Siro Fuata’i and Nua Tupai, who travelled to Samoa as part of the New Zealand national relief effort, for their research assistance.*