



Atoifi Adventist Hospital, Solomon Islands.

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Atoifi Adventist Hospital is a Seventh-day Adventist medical and surgical institution situated on the isolated east coast of Malaita, one of the larger of the Solomon Islands' 992 islands.¹ It overlooks the protected anchorage provided by Uru Harbor. It is the only hospital owned and operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in any of the Pacific Islands.

Early History

The Seventh-day Adventist Church commenced operations in the Western Solomon Islands in May 1914. Griffiths F. Jones, a former sea captain, along with his wife Marion, arrived in Gizo, now the administrative headquarters for the area. They commenced work in nearby Viru Harbor on the west coast of the island of New Georgia.² The next year, another husband and wife team of Sydney Sanitarium-trained nurses, Oscar and Ella Hellestrand, arrived and commenced health work in the Solomon Islands.³

In September 1924, John D. Anderson and his wife Guinevere, travelling on the Adventist mission vessel *Melanesia*, arrived in Uru Harbor.⁴ This area, where the hospital is now located, is known as Kwaio country. Some Kwaio people live along the coast but most have a very basic existence in the mountainous inland of the island.

During 1929, a young Kwaio girl who had left her village, was living at Uru Harbor with the Adventist minister Simi and his wife, Mary. They were attacked by a Kwaio man who killed the young woman and Mary, and seriously injured Simi.⁵ From that time forward, Atoifi has been a place of considerable risk and personal sacrifice.

Planning for the Hospital

In 1937, the Adventist Church established Amyes Memorial Hospital on Kolombangara Island near the provincial headquarters of Gizo in the Western Province.⁶ After the government had established its hospital at Gizo, the country's British administration encouraged the Adventist Church to move its hospital from the Western Province to the very isolated and neglected eastern side of Malaita.⁷

In 1935, a small 12-bed hospital had been started at Kwailibesi on the northern end of Malaita.⁸ While working there, Eddie Parker also identified the need for health care in the Kwaio area. A preliminary search identified Uru Harbour as the best potential location. In 1958, Adventist church leaders, who were visiting the area, received a delegation from the Kwaio people asking for a clinic in their area.⁹

After further inspections, it was agreed that the Uru Harbor site was the best option for the new Malaita Hospital. Eventually, a local landowner offered a suitable site that had enough land for a large hospital and its associated housing and gardens, along with the required proximity to the harbor.¹⁰

On December 7, 1961, the Bismarck Solomons Union Mission (BSUM) executive voted to use funds that had been previously allocated to rebuild the small hospital at Kwailibesi, for the construction of the new Malaita Hospital. It was agreed that the British Solomon Island Protectorate Government would purchase the site and then lease it back to the Church. Unfortunately, there were some delays in the settlement and payment for the land, foreshadowing future contentions over just who actually owned the property.¹¹

Building the Hospital

In 1962, in preparation for the building of the hospital, approval was given to clear the land, prepare gardens, and start building the wharf and the road from the harbor up to the elevated hospital site.¹² This work, along with the making of concrete blocks by using sand and gravel carried from a distance, started under the supervision of Nurse Ellis Gibbons, who had been based at Kwailibesi.¹³ Lester Hawkes, the BSUM health director, used the design of Sopas Adventist Hospital in the highlands of Papua New Guinea as a model in preparing the new hospital's layout. Brian Houlston, the building trades teacher at the Jones Missionary College in Papua New Guinea, drew up the plans.¹⁴

The Australasian Union Conference (now the South Pacific Division) and the BSUM decided to allocate funds from the 1965 fourth quarter's Sabbath School offering for the building of the new hospital.¹⁵ This decision enabled more intensive building to proceed at the new site. Lionel Smith, a carpenter, replaced Gibbons in July 1963 and with the help of Michael, a local builder, he continued the preparatory works and built the initial temporary accommodation. After working all day, Lionel Smith and his wife, Gertrude, conducted, in their own temporary accommodation, the very first medical clinics on the site. In order to save money, wherever possible the building materials were sourced or fabricated on site or nearby. In 1964, Malcolm Long assisted with construction. The following year, builder Merven Polly took over as the lead builder.¹⁶

Tragedy Delays the Hospital Opening

In the lead up to the opening of the new Malaita hospital, nurses Brian and Valmae Dunn arrived and were soon treating so many patients that they ran out of supplies within days. After some busy weeks, late on the night of Thursday, December 16, 1965, Brian Dunn, after providing assistance for a sick patient, turned and was about to enter the front door of their new home when he was speared from behind. The spear, made from steel reinforcing rod, penetrated Dunn's body. In desperation, an agonizing trip was undertaken to get him to the country's main hospital in the capital, Honiara, on the distant island of Guadalcanal. The surgeons there were able to remove the spear but, while recovering from the difficult surgery, Dunn died on December 19, 1965, at just 25 years of age.¹⁷

The Hospital Opening

In June 1966, Dr. Lynn McMahon, his wife Maurine, and their children, arrived as the second expatriate family to commence work at the soon to be opened hospital.¹⁸ Lynn McMahon was the first of many medical superintendents to serve Atoifi Adventist Hospital. All superintendents faced challenges such as a lack of medical supplies, the inability to consult with a specialist, and a failing generator in the middle of surgical procedures. Often donated supplies carried the hospital through times of scarcity.¹⁹

The hospital officially opened on August 25, 1966.²⁰ Government and church officials as well as people from across the Solomon Islands were in attendance. The highlight of the event was a parade of the largest ever assembled fleet of decorated Adventist mission vessels. The High Commissioner for the Western Pacific commended the Church for building a hospital in such a remote area.²¹

Reporting on the official opening of the hospital, Aubrey R. Mitchell, then president of the BSUM, noted that, despite many delays and frustrations, some sixteen buildings were finished. There were “two general wards, male and female, infant welfare clinic, theatre, x-ray plant, laboratory, hydrotherapy, O.B [obstetrics] section, infectious ward, outpatients’ clinic, dispensary, office, nurses’ home, plus the doctor’s and European nurse’s homes, national workers’ homes, utility buildings etc.”²²

During the planning for the hospital, in the official church minutes and articles it had been referred to as “the Malaita Seventh-day Adventist Hospital.” However, at the time of the opening, the hospital board requested, and the executive committee of the Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission the approved, that the facility be renamed Atoifi Adventist Hospital.²³ Its mission was to bring health and healing to the communities on the remote eastern side of the island of Malaita.

The Growth and Development of the Hospital

Brian and Valmae Dunn were replaced in late 1966 by Lens and Betty Larwood, both nurses trained at Sydney Sanitarium. Lens Larwood became the hospital manager as well as the director of nursing. For thirteen years, he worked constantly to make improvements to hospital facilities and infrastructure. With his drive and the assistance of many volunteers and volunteer teams, outlying clinics were established, a nurse education program commenced, and classrooms and dormitories were added. A major step forward was the installation of the country’s first hydroelectric plant designed to provide a continual power supply. This “was officially set in operation by the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific on March 3, 1974.”²⁴

By 1969, Larwood had begun training young Solomon Islanders to work as nurses in the hospital.²⁵ In 1973, Ian Cameron, accompanied by his wife, Dianne, both nurses, were appointed to head up a new Atoifi School of Nursing.²⁶ Cameron developed the curriculum for the three-year course and then commenced classes. Initially, government authorities resisted granting accreditation for the course. Many of the very early students had to begin all over again at the government’s hospital in Honiara to become licensed nurses.²⁷ By 2019, approximately half of the nurses in the country were trained at Atoifi and these graduates held in high esteem

because of the quality of their work. Many went on to hold prominent healthcare positions around the country and across the Pacific.

Without road access, Atoifi was extremely isolated. The hospital depended heavily on boats for supplies and for moving staff as well as for regular clinic operation along the coast. Lens Larwood and Colin Winch, the Western Pacific Union Mission (WPUM) Adventist Health director and mission pilot, identified a site for a possible airstrip. It was covered in thick swampy jungle at the end of the bay.²⁸ Several visiting Sydney Adventist Hospital doctors and two student nurses, who experienced a prolonged and convoluted journey from Honiara to the hospital, saw the desperate need for air access and started raising funds for the project. In August 1973, after difficult negotiations for the land, Larwood commenced the clearing of trees and draining of the area. The wet climate, large trees, and soggy soil proved extremely challenging. Eventually, with crushed coral for the surface, the strip was ready. Winch, flying the WPUM twin-engine Aztec, made the first landing on December 2, 1975.²⁹ For the fortunate, this turned a 24-hour open ocean boat trip to Honiara, into a 30-minute flight.³⁰ Ten days later, on December 12, 1975, the newly completed airstrip brought Guinevere Anderson and other important guests to Atoifi. The occasion marked the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the work of the Church by the Andersons at Uru Harbour.³¹ With Mrs Anderson present, the new airstrip was also dedicated.

Ongoing Tragedies and Challenges

On August 15, 1979, Lens Larwood was using a tractor to pull a trailer loaded with equipment and materials up the hill to the hospital's hydroelectric plant. Tragically, the tractor slipped on the steep slope and rolled, taking Larwood's life.³³ With Larwood's death, Atoifi lost its "business manager, nursing director, supervising engineer, marine operations manager and public relations manager."³² In 1985, a church was built and dedicated by the hospital as a tribute to both Lens Larwood and Brian Dunn.³²

Brian Dunn and Lens Larwood were not the only expatriate workers to tragically die while serving at Atoifi. In 2003, Lance Gersbach, along with his wife Jean, an experienced nurse, arrived at Atoifi. Lance Gersbach served as business manager for the hospital. Only a short time after they arrived, he was overlooking the site of a new campus store when he was attacked from behind and died instantly.³³ Atoifi is a place of great personal sacrifice. Not only for those who gave their lives, but also for their bereaved partners, children, and colleagues.

Over the years, the hospital at Atoifi was further developed. A telephone system was installed and eventually the hospital was given internet access. New nurses' accommodations were built and subsidiary clinics were opened. In the early days, coastal clinics were regularly visited by the Adventist medical launch *Dani*, based at Atoifi, which was constantly used for medical patrols. By 2019, those patrols were conducted in much smaller, but faster, boats.

Despite all the ongoing challenges, between August 26 and 28, 2016, Atoifi Adventist Hospital celebrated fifty years of operation. Kwaio people, staff, along with government, diplomatic, and church dignitaries, joined together to celebrate the occasion. The prime minister of the country, Manasseh Sogovare, praised the hospital and its team saying, “this is one of the best hospitals in Solomon Islands—one of the most respected and well equipped.”³⁴

Meeting the Challenges

Leaders at Atoifi have battled with the impact of its remoteness, transport costs, and uncertainties, slow or intermittent communications, and inaccessibility from its administrating union conference offices.³⁵ Currently, the Trans-Pacific Union Mission headquarters are in Suva, the capital of Fiji, 2150 kilometers (1,335 miles) away.

Across the Solomon Islands there are thirty-six Adventist clinics that have been rejuvenated under the Adopt-a-Clinic program. Six of these are assisted directly or from time to time by teams from the Atoifi Hospital.³⁶

Hospital staff are also involved in and committed to conducting medical patrols into the hinterland and along the coast.

Dr. Chester Kuma served as the Atoifi Hospital's medical director and chief executive officer from 1989 to 1998. He is currently the director of Adventist Health Ministries for the South Pacific Division and he also serves on the Atoifi Hospital's board. Kuma has said that “a special tribute needs to be given to the numerous volunteers, and teams of volunteers, who have raised money, built new buildings, maintained existing facilities and provided equipment.”³⁷ Many doctors, nurses, dentists, and allied health professionals have volunteered their time to treat patients, conduct surgery, or train staff. Today, Atoifi Adventist Hospital continues its mission to serve the very needy communities on the eastern side of Malaita.

Hospital Leadership³⁸

Medical Superintendents:

Dr. Lynn McMahon (1966-1969); Dr. Haynes Posala (1969-1982); Dr. Douglas Pikacha (1982-1984);³⁹ Dr. J. Chee (1986-1989); Dr. Chester Kuma (1989-1998); Dr. Lipson Sisiolo (1998); Dr. Narko Tutuo (1999); Dr. David Paul Jama (2000-2001); Dr. Lemuel Lecciones (2002-2006); Dr. Noel Mondejar (2007); Dr. Elmer Ribeyro (2008-2016); Dr. Jason Diau (2016-)

Directors of Nursing (DON):

Brian Dunn (1965); Lens Larwood (1966-1979); Robyn Leet (1980-1981); Brian Robinson (1982-1986); Ben Vavozo (1986-1990); Hettie Asugeni (1990-2004); Nashley Vozoto (2005-2009); Rowena Asugeni (2010-2012); Relmah Harrington (2013); Rowena Asugeni (2014-)

Directors of the School of Nursing (Principal):

Ian Cameron (1973-1978); Len Doble (1979-1981); Graham Evans (1982-1984); Geoff Wilson (1985); Jimmy Jays (1986-1988); Julie Tutuo (1989-1991); Lorraine Hope (1992-1994); Rick Brewster Webb (1995); Julie Aengari (1996-2002); Lester Asugeni (2003-2004-acting); Humpress Harrington (2005-2016); Alwin Muse (acting, 2017); Lester Asugeni (2018-)

Hospital Business Management

Throughout the history of the hospital, business management has taken different forms and titles. At times, it was covered by the director of nursing; for example, Lens Larwood carried both roles. At other times it has been handled by the medical superintendent; for example, Dr. Chester Kuma carried both roles. Many times it was the responsibility of a specific person who acted as the chief executive officer or business manager.

Hospital Services for 2018⁴⁰

Total registered beds – 65 (with a total capacity of up to 100 beds)

Services offered:

- General outpatients and emergencies
- Surgeries–Intermediate/Minor and some major emergencies
- Medical
- Pediatrics
- Labor
- Antenatal, delivery, and postnatal care
- Hospital Pharmacy and second level medical store
- Radiology
- Medical laboratory and diagnostic services
- Primary health care–community outreach clinics
- Chaplaincy

Number of outpatient treatments: 16,094 (including outreach clinics)

Number of Inpatient admissions: 1,153

Number of surgical cases: 173

Number of medical /surgical staff (qualified practitioners): 1 with 2 medical officers joining the team in 2019

Number of nursing staff: 33

Number of allied health professionals: - 6 (paramedical department)

Number of administrative staff: 5 (business office staff)

Number of other support staff: 13 (laundry, cleaning, maintenance and security staff)

Postal Address: PO Box 930 Honiara, Solomon Islands

Location: Atoifi Adventist Hospital, Uru Harbor, Island of Malaita, Solomon Islands.

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NOTES

1. See "Solomon Islands," Tourism Solomons, 2018, accessed September 20, 2019, <https://www.visitsolomons.com.sb/about-the-solomon/>.
2. See "Solomon Islands" and "Solomon Islands Mission."
3. Ibid.
4. John David Anderson and Guinevere Mary Anderson, "To Melanesia—With Love, Chapter 6: Land and Building Problems at Uru," *Australasian Record*, October 13, 1980, 11.
5. Milton Hook, *Vina Juapa Rane—Early Adventism in the Solomon Islands*, Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series (Wahroonga, New South Wales: South Pacific Division Education Department, n. d.), 25.
6. See "Amyes Memorial Hospital Solomon Islands."
7. Dennis Steley, "The Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the South Pacific, Excluding Papua New Guinea, 1886- 1986" (PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 1989), 137-138.

See also: Eddie Piez, "Atoifi Hospital, Malaita," *Journal of Pacific Adventist History* 7, no. 1 (June 2007): 19-27
8. Ibid., 20.
9. Ibid., 20-21.
10. Ibid., 21.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 22.
13. Ibid., 23.
14. Ibid., 22.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 24.
17. Lester Hawkes and Leta Billy, "Brian Dunn—Adventist Martyr on the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands— 1965," *Journal of Adventist History* 8 no. 1 (October 2008): 28-31; see also: R. R. Frame, "Tragic Death of Medical Missionary, Brian Dunn," *Australasian Record*, January 24 1966, 1; see also Dunn, Brian Mansfield

18. Eddie Piez, "Atoifi Hospital, Malaita," *Journal of Pacific Adventist History* 7, no. 1 (June 2007): 25
19. L. H. McMahon, "Medical Missionary Work on Malaita," *Australasian Record*, October 13, 1969, 8.
20. A. R. Mitchell, "Opening of Atoifi Adventist Hospital, Malaita," *Australasian Record*, January 23, 1967, 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Bismarck-Solomons Union Mission Executive Committee Minutes, "Name of Hospital," September 21, 1966, 327.
24. Haynes Posala, "Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!" *Australasian Record*, April 29, 1974, 1.
25. Dianne Cameron, phone interview with author, September 22, 2019.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Colin Winch, phone interview with author, November 9, 2019.
29. Lens G. Larwood, "Atoifi Air Strip," *Australasian Record*, March 1, 1976, 8-9.
30. Colin Winch, phone interview with author, November 9, 2019.
31. Warren Millist, "Lens and Betty Larwood: a Tribute," *Adventist Record*, November 7, 2015, 10-11.
32. Ibid.; See Larwood, Lens.
33. Brenton Stacey, "Missionary Murdered in the Solomons," *Record* [South Pacific Division], *June* 7, 2003, 5. See Gersbach, Lance.
34. Kent Kingston, "Atoifi Celebrates 50 Years of Service," *Record* [South Pacific Division], September 17, 2016, 10-11.
35. Chester Kuma, interview with author, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia, April 10, 2019.
36. Clinics associated or assisted by the hospital are Hanoa, Kafurumu, Sihu, Kwalbesi, Sango, and Taramata. See also Adopt-a-Clinic in the SPD.
37. Chester Kuma interview with author, Wahroonga, NSW, Australia, April 10, 2019.

38. Names supplied by Dr. Jason Diau, the current medical superintendent of Atoifi, and Pastor Maveni Kaufononga, the current board chairman and TPUM President.

39. Dr. Junilyn Pikacha, wife of Dr. Douglas Pikacha, was the nation's first female medical practitioner.

40. Chester Kuma, interview with the author, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia, April 10, 2019.

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