



Aore Adventist Hospital
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Aore Adventist Hospital, Vanuatu

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Aore Adventist Hospital operated between 1961 and 1977, and again briefly in 1981. It was located on the campus of Aore Adventist High School New Hebrides (modern Vanuatu).¹

Developments That Led to the Establishment of the Hospital

Vanuatu, known prior to its 1980 independence as the New Hebrides, saw the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries arrive in 1912. They started working on the central island of Malekula whose people were amongst the most savage in the country. Their culture was steeped in heathen customs and tribal warfare.² Their hygiene was non-existent. From the beginning, basic health care and hygiene were integral to the early missionaries' work.

By the mid-1920s, the mission's leaders felt that they should start a training school to educate students from several islands whose villagers had renounced their animistic way of life. The missionaries searched for and found a property on Aore, an island off the southern coast of the island of Espiritu Santo. The site was considered ideal because its harbor would offer a safe anchorage for the mission's boats.³

The mission station commenced operations in 1927, comprising an elementary school and ministerial training school. Bush was cleared and gardens planted by the students and staff.⁴ A wharf, classrooms and staff housing were built, followed soon after by a dispensary to care for the health needs of the students and staff, as well as those from nearby villages. The dispensary was initially located on the foreshore of the Aore campus to make it more accessible to those coming by boat.

A marine workshop was established in the late 1930s⁵ with a missionary engineer appointed to care for the boats' maintenance. The headquarters for the New Hebrides Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were also based on the Aore campus from 1945⁶ to 1961.⁷ Consequently, a sizeable group of missionaries with their wives and children was based on Aore. The missionaries' wives, some of whom were trained nurses, cared for the dispensary assisted by a Ni-Vanuatu nurse, Maseng Bu, who had been trained by earlier missionaries.

As the mission station grew in scope, so did an awareness of the need for better medical facilities to address epidemic diseases, such as malaria, yaws, and dengue fever, that seemed to flourish in the surrounding areas. An appeal for funds to establish a hospital was published in the *Australasian Record* in 1951 by the secretary-treasurer of the Central Pacific Union Mission.⁸ However, the mission station was to wait another decade before a hospital could be built.

Founding of the Institution

Freeman McCutcheon, president of the New Hebrides Mission between 1952 and 1957, was the driving force behind the construction of the Aore Hospital. Union and Australasian (later South Pacific) Division administrators also offered their support. A twenty-one-bed hospital was built on the Aore campus in 1960 by builders from Espiritu Santo (including an Indian from Fiji). The structure consisted of hardwood frames standing on a concrete slab, clad with weather boards and a corrugated iron roof.⁹ The new building replaced a little fibro-cement dispensary that for some years stood behind a staff house (currently the site of the school principal's residence) near the center of the campus. The hospital comprised a male and female ward, birthing suite, operating theater, office, consultation room, and two isolation rooms.¹⁰ A kitchen/laundry was built of concrete blocks behind the hospital, along with two 5,000 gallon in-ground concrete tanks in which to store drinking water collected from the roof. The new building was opened in 1961¹¹ with Elders McCutcheon and Thompson officiating¹².

Dr. Joeli Taoui, a Fijian and newly convert Adventist, was appointed superintendent of the new hospital in 1961, and arrived with his wife, Miliakere Roko, and eight children on the maiden flight of Fiji Airways to the New Hebrides. "Dr. Joeli," as he became widely known in the New Hebrides, was a graduate of the Fiji School of Medicine and a medical practitioner who had worked for the Fiji government for ten years as a medical officer in several isolated clinics on Vanua Levu, Fiji. Part of his job was to visit remote areas on foot, by horseback, and by boat. He had also worked at the Toomey Hospital (a tuberculosis and leper colony hospital) in Suva for two years. His past professional experience and strong faith in God made him an ideal candidate for the work in the New Hebrides¹³.

History of the Institution

When the hospital opened there was a shortage of trained New Hebridean staff, so two experienced Fijian nurses, Loselini and Atelini, were appointed to work as matrons with Taoui for the first four years, along with a few Ni-Vanuatu nurses who had been working at the dispensary on campus. In the mid-1960s, an Australian nursing sister, Isobel Paget, wife of ships' engineer Arnold Paget, worked with Taoui as acting matron for several years, relieving the need for a Fijian matron. To address the need for trained nurses, Taoui set up a school of nursing with the matron and himself as instructors. The first class of three young female and two young male nurses graduated from their four-year training course in 1966.¹⁴ Four of them were hired to remain and work in the Aore Hospital and one was appointed district nurse on Aoba (now Ambae) Island.

Taoui needed a lab assistant to sterilize his surgical instruments, care for blood tests, and perform other duties, so he trained a young man named Ephraim Maltock for this role. Maltock later married Phyllis, whom Taoui trained as a midwife, and the couple remained on the hospital staff until it closed.¹⁵ Other staff employed at the hospital included a cook, laundry maid, gardener/maintenance man, and cleaner.

The hospital ran on a very limited budget, depending on surplus equipment, such as surgical instruments, an x-ray machine, autoclaves, and dental equipment, donated by hospitals in Australia and New Zealand. Radio was used to notify the doctor when shipments of supplies might be expected. This often outdated equipment and all other supplies needed by the hospital were brought to Aore from the port in Santo in wooden crates by mission boats such as the *Nakalagi*, *Leleo*, *Rani*, *Kasi*, and *Pacifique* that were based at Aore.¹⁶ Once the equipment was installed, it usually had to be coaxed into life and nursed along very carefully. For most of the hospital's years of operation, the doctor and his staff struggled with this occasionally unreliable equipment. While the main hospital building itself was relatively new, the X-ray and dental services were housed in dilapidated timber outbuildings¹⁷ that were never replaced by new buildings, due to a lack of funds. Additionally, the main Aore campus generator ran for only three

hours per day each evening, so when power was required for any procedure at the hospital during the day or later at night, the hospital maintenance man would crank start an old 6 Kva diesel generator.

In spite of its dated equipment, the Adventist hospital became known as a very trusted center of healing due to the high rates of recovery from a wide range of illnesses and accidents, including burns. There were many cases of people arriving who were so ill that Taoi had to tell their families that there were no medicines powerful enough to heal them, but there was the power of prayer if they were willing for the Adventist doctor to pray for their sick one. Often, after a session of heartfelt prayer, and assisted by loving, around the clock care by the nursing staff, the very ill patient made a miraculous recovery, sometimes in a matter of days.¹⁸ People of the surrounding islands often travelled considerable distances to bring their sick to Taoi and the Aore nursing staff.¹⁹ To accommodate family members who needed to stay close while their loved one received treatment, a series of corrugated iron huts were built in the hospital garden area where relatives could live rent-free.²⁰ Sometimes, if the sick patient died, the family was able to stay on longer while organizing funeral arrangements.

Aore's mission boats played an important support role in the medical work done by Taoi and his team, transporting patients from surrounding islands to Aore and returning them when they were healed. During its operation the hospital averaged annually 700 to 800 in-patients, 300 minor and major surgeries, sixty to eighty births, and between six and seven thousand out-patients.²¹ Many of these patients were seen on other islands, with the SDA doctor and his laboratory technician transported by boat to villages on Malo, Santo, Malekula, Ambae, Ambrym and Paama, where they conducted mobile clinics and immunized children. They took a portable Primus stove with them to sterilize their kit of surgical instruments, so were always ready for the dental work or minor surgeries that were so often needed.²²

Taoi struggled to spend time with his family. When he was not running clinics on other islands, the needs of patients on Aore required his constant attendance at the hospital.²³ He gained the trust of the local people as well as those of the expatriate populations (French, British, Chinese and Vietnamese)²⁴ to the extent that sometimes patients from the larger French government hospital in Santo discharged themselves, travelled out to Aore, and asked to be treated.²⁵ The mission ran a daily shipping service to Santo to facilitate patient transfer to and from Aore, but other shipping services and taxi boats also brought patients to see "Dr Joeli."²⁶ In recognition of his contribution to health services in the New Hebrides, the British government awarded Taoi an OBE (Officer of the British Empire) in 1963.²⁷

Due to the need to expand the hospital's facilities, the Adventist mission built a new separate infectious diseases ward in 1965 at the eastern side of the hospital and then, in 1967, completed a new southern wing overlooking the sea, comprised of a matron's office, storeroom, kitchenette, and a new operating theater.²⁸ In 1966, Taoi was able to spend a few weeks studying under senior surgeons at the White Memorial Medical Center in Los Angeles, California.²⁹ Later the same year, Marion Barnard, an Adventist surgeon from California, flew to the New Hebrides to assist Taoi with some complex surgeries. Barnard was to return to Aore multiple times over the next decade, sometimes with his son, Marion Barnard, Jr., and daughter, Jo Ellen Barnard, both surgeons. Other specialists flew in from Sydney Adventist Hospital in Australia during this era.³⁰ Taoi would prepare the cases for the visiting surgeons, assist during surgery, and then, after the overseas doctors had departed, care for the patients assisted by the nurses, until they recovered. Some patients flew to the New Hebrides from as far away as Fiji to receive treatment.

In late 1972, to extend the Aore Hospital's capabilities, the British government organized a scholarship through the World Health Organization for Taoi to specialize. He moved with his family to New Zealand where he obtained a Diploma of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1974. In his absence, the Aore hospital was managed by an Australian nursing sister, Iona Markey,³¹ followed by Noelene Ferrey³² who was assisted by a registered nurse, Gladys, from Atoifi Adventist Hospital in Solomon Islands. On his return from New Zealand, Taoi saw the need to expand the medical work in the New Hebrides. He established a clinic on Big Bay (northern Espiritu Santo) where Calvin Joe, one of his male nurses, and his wife, Rolina, were appointed.³³ Serious cases were referred to the Aore Hospital.

Taoi continued to lead out in the medical work at Aore until 1977 when he resigned due to the needs of his family and took up an appointment on Malekula as the medical superintendent for the British government.³⁴ The Central Pacific Union was unable to find a doctor to continue running the hospital, and patient numbers decreased significantly. Two nurses who had been trained by Taoi, Lily May Maseng Nalo, wife of a mission boat captain, and Aklet Nathaniel cared for the hospital for several years running it as a clinic. In 1979, Malcolm Rae, a male nurse from Australia, spent a year as a volunteer building up patient numbers at Aore partly by making regular visits to the small communities around Aore Island.³⁵ In 1980, after independence was granted by the British and French governments, an armed uprising by rebels in Santo that curtailed boat transport between many of the northern islands ultimately caused the hospital to close.

When Australian Adventist church members learned that Aore Hospital had closed, a movement was started to raise funds to provide the necessary finance to reopen it. Garnet Dale, who had previously worked on Aore as a volunteer plumber, was one of the campaign leaders who, supported by Taoi, flew from Fiji to Australia to guide the fundraising.³⁶ A significant amount of money was collected and handed to officers of the South Pacific Division in Sydney. In 1980, the division health director, Dr. Ray Swannell, and Dr. Steve Smith from Atoifi Adventist Hospital in the Solomon Islands made a joint visit to Aore to assess the condition of the facilities and to see what needed to be done before the hospital could be reopened.³⁷

A list of required upgrades was prepared³⁸ and two volunteer teams from Australia were directed to work on some building improvements for the hospital, while off-duty mission boat crew members on Aore re-painted the interior of the building. Medical supplies were ordered and shipped to Vanuatu. Unaware of the plans to reopen Aore Hospital, Dr. Paul Cameron contacted the South Pacific Division in 1980 to offer his services as a medical practitioner in a

voluntary capacity for 1981. He was appointed to re-open Aore Hospital, agreeing to work in a voluntary capacity for a year and then work for a further two years as a salaried doctor. Cameron spent the early part of 1981 working in Solomon Islands at the Central Hospital in Honiara and the Atoifi Adventist Hospital on Malaita in order to gain tropical diseases experience before arriving at Aore with his wife, Sharyn, in May 1981.³⁹

While significant effort was channeled into reopening the hospital, demand for a doctor's services proved to be limited and it soon became apparent to Cameron that a clinic staffed by a competent nurse would adequately meet the demand for health services on Aore. The decision to close Aore as a hospital for the final time was made before the year ended. Two main reasons were given for the marked decline in demand for health services at the Aore Hospital compared to earlier decades. Post-independence, the government-run hospital in Santo was now being staffed by English-speaking doctors who provided a competent service that was more accessible to South Santo's remote communities after significant improvements had been made to roads. It was no longer an easier option to travel by boat across to Aore. Secondly, the new rural health department had built and staffed several clinics around Santo and Malo (islands neighboring Aore), which meant that people in those areas requiring medical attention no longer needed to travel to Aore.⁴⁰ Any serious cases who presented at the rural health clinics were referred to the hospital in Santo.

Aore continues to operate as a clinic, with a qualified nurse managing the program. Most of the clients present as outpatients, but there is a five-bed ward that can be used if anyone needs to be kept in under observation for a few days. A birthing suite is also used by local mothers. Two-thirds of the original hospital building are now used by the Adventist high school, which still operates on Aore's campus, as transit accommodation for volunteer "Fly and Build" teams that come to help the school.⁴¹

Historical Role of the Institution

Taoi and those working with him had a profound impact on the health and well-being of many thousands of people in the northern region of the New Hebrides for fifteen years. Large numbers passed through the hospital's outpatient department or were admitted. Additionally, those living along the coastlines of islands that were regularly visited benefitted by having their most pressing health needs met in their own villages, while those with significant health issues were transported to the hospital at Aore. Given the scarcity of medical aid available on most of these islands in that era, the work of the Adventist doctor and his helpers filled a need not being met by other organization. While caring for peoples' physical needs around the islands, Taoi's ministry of mercy spread the influence of the love of God and the witness of the Seventh-day Adventist faith far beyond the confines of the hospital.

At the hospital itself, Taoi and his team witnessed constantly to the love and power of God. Patients were usually prayed for collectively and individually. A "worship house" was built for the patients and staff to use, and Taoi organized a roster for worships in each of the wards. Many patients gained a much clearer picture of the love of God as they convalesced in the hospital. Two evangelistic programs were also run by the hospital staff, resulting in multiple baptisms.⁴² In this way, the medical work very much complimented the outreach of Adventist missionaries stationed on some of the surrounding islands as well as that of the mission's high school, which shared the Aore campus with the hospital.

List of Administrators

Dr. Joeli Taoi (1962-1972); Nursing Sister Iona Markey (1973); Nursing Sister Noelene Ferrey (1974); Dr. Joeli Taoi (1975-1977); Nurse Lilymay Maseng Nalo (1978-1980); Dr. Paul Cameron (1981).

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise credited, much of the information in this article comes from the personal knowledge and experience of the author who served as a teacher at Aore from 1979 to 1986, as principal from 2007 to 2010, and subsequently a frequent visitor.?
2. Sam Dick, a teacher in the New Hebrides from 1979-1986, interview by the author.?
3. C. H. Parker, "Latest Developments on Malekula," *Australasian Record*, March 8, 1926, 1.?
4. Sam Dick, conversations with the author who served as a teacher in the New Hebrides from 1979-1986.?
5. Charlie Tucker (ships' engineer on Aore in the 1940s), interview by the author, Aore, 1983.?
6. "New Hebrides Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, page 71, accessed February 23, 2020. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1945.pdf>.?
7. "New Hebrides Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, page 79, accessed February 23, 2020. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1962.pdf>.?
8. Eric Hoken, "Three Outstanding Needs," *Australasian Record*, May 14, 1951, 5.?
9. Personal knowledge of the author making occasional repairs made to the building from 1980-2019.?
10. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
11. Ron Taylor, "The People Who Sat in Darkness," *Australasian Record*, July 11, 1966, 3-4.?
12. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
13. Ibid.?
14. Ron Taylor, "The People Who Sat in Darkness," *Australasian Record*, July 11, 1966, 3-4.?
15. Phyllis Maltok, phone interview by the author, Port Vila, December 10, 2019.?
16. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
17. Observed by the author when he arrived on Aore as a teacher in 1979.?
18. Joeli Taoi, "God of the Sabbath Mission," *World Mission Report*, 4th Quarter, 1975.?
19. Ron Taylor, "The People Who Sat in Darkness," *Australasian Record*, July 11, 1966, 3-4.?
20. Personal knowledge of the author working on Aore from 1979-1986?
21. Colin Crawford, "Of Brave Hearts," *Australasian Record*, April 17, 1972, 1.?
22. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr Joeli, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
23. Ibid.?
24. Gaeton Lecerf (a Frenchman who in his youth ran a taxi boat service from Santo to the Aore Hospital), interview by the author, December 10, 2019.?
25. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
26. Gaeton Lecerf (a Frenchman who in his youth ran a taxi boat service from Santo to the Aore Hospital), interview by the author, Santo, December 10, 2019.?
27. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
28. Isabel Paget (Acting Aore Hospital Matron in the mid-1960s), conversations with the writer on Aore, July, 2005?
29. Robert Cooper, "An Observer in Post Graduate Team, White Memorial Medical Centre," *Australasian Record*, November 28, 1966, 1-2.?
- 30.

Marion Barnard, visiting surgeon, interview by the author, Aore, May 1980.?

31. Gordon Lee, "An Island Safari," *Australasian Record*, December 15, 1975, 5-6.?
32. Alan Rosendahl, teacher on Aore 1972-1978, email to author, August 10, 2019.?
33. Rachel Joe (sister-in-law of Calvin Joe), interview by the author, Aore, December 9, 2019.?
34. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
35. Personal knowledge of the author serving on Aore as a teacher 1979-1986.?
36. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?
37. Steve Smith, email to author, January 10, 2020.?
38. Ray Swannell, unpublished document provided to the writer by Dr. Paul Cameron in Launceston, Tasmania, February 19, 2020.?
39. Paul and Sharyn Cameron, interview by the author, Launceston, Tasmania, February 19, 2020.?
40. Paul Cameron, unpublished report submitted in 1981 to SPD officers recommending the closure of the Aore Hospital, with a copy provided to the writer in Launceston, Tasmania, February 19, 2020.?
41. Personal knowledge of the author who returned as Aore's Principal 2007-2010.?
42. Tokasa Thompson, a daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, email to the author, November 11, 2019.?

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