



VILLAGE MISSION CLINIC

Kingdom of Tonga

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR GENERAL PRACTITIONERS INTERESTED
IN ASSISTING THE VILLAGE MISSION CLINIC

Brief History

The Village Mission Clinic is a well-respected, general family medicine practice with clients from all over Tongatapu and even from the outer islands.

It was started in 1984 by Mr Manu and Dr Glennis Mafi in a large village called Ha'ateiho, in central Tongatapu, 9km from the capital Nuku'alofa and 4km from the government hospital. Dr Glennis and Manu ran it for most of the first 17 years and have continued to oversee it since 2001. They are in the process of handing the Clinic on to Dr Lisimoni and Jacqui Kami who share the same vision for healthcare in Tonga. Since May 2010 the clinic has worked solely from the Village Mission Pharmacy premises in Nuku'alofa. Both the Clinic and the Pharmacy are run on a not-for-profit basis with all income used to support the work of the clinic and pharmacy. In recognition of the not-for-profit status, Village Mission Trust was incorporated in Tonga in 2003.

Mission Statement

The Village Mission Clinic wishes to provide high quality primary health care for the people of Tonga at as a low a cost as possible, and in a Christian setting i.e. to be aware of spiritual needs; to treat the whole person; and to do that from a Christian point of view where appropriate, though always respecting the person's own philosophy of life.

The objectives of the Village Mission Trust are:

- 1) To establish and maintain a Christian witness in Tonga through health ministries, and to make a significant contribution to the health and well-being of the community.
- 2) Whenever possible to demonstrate through these health services that the Christian faith integrates with daily life and experience and can make a difference, especially to those suffering physically, mentally and spiritually and to those who support and surround them.
- 3) To establish or assist with the establishment of medical facilities, whether primary medical care clinics, pharmacies, community clinics or hospitals or any other related health service in Tonga, and to establish these on a foundation of Christian principles.
- 4) To work cooperatively with other health services and professionals in Tonga.
- 5) To encourage and be active in research in health related areas.
- 6) To be involved in ongoing education of health professionals in Tonga, whether local people or visiting health professionals and students

Location and Facilities

The Clinic is located in the Patco building which is on the main road in Nuku'alofa. It has a parking area then a path through a small garden leading to the building. The clinic has two consultation rooms and one treatment room. The pharmacy has a main shop area and a dispensary. There is a shared staff room. The facility is simple but clean and bright. The clinic is currently not computerised except for the tele health (internet) consultations.

Services

Case work covers the whole spectrum of health problems and there is potential for research in many areas. Chronic diseases such as diabetes and ischaemic heart disease are major health problems in Tonga. The Clinic is in a good position to assist the Ministry of Health in primary and secondary prevention.

The clinic is particularly well known for expertise in dermatology, and Dr Taniela Palu (Tongan) runs a diabetes clinic on Friday mornings, but any GP working there can develop his/her own area of special expertise.

Prescription medicines available at Village Mission Pharmacy cover a wider range of community medicines than is available through the Vaiola Hospital pharmacy, and special requirements for individuals are met if at all possible. Donated supplies are often received and supplement bought medicines, enabling medicines to be provided for people who cannot afford bought medicines. No subsidies are available from the Tongan Government; all income for the clinic is from consultation fees, with a small amount of monetary donations in New Zealand which is used mainly for repair or purchase of equipment, and shipping. However Tongan patients can fill prescriptions at the government hospital for free and also get lab tests done there.

Relation to Tongan Government Departments

The Village Mission Clinic has always had a good relationship with Tongan government departments that relate to the services we offer.

Ministry of Health

The Clinic and its founders Mr Manu Mafi and Dr Glennis Mafi are well known to the Ministry of Health. Clinic doctors are encouraged to actively participate in the weekly hospital meetings.

Department of Immigration

The Clinic has always complied with the requirements of immigration for visiting staff.

Relation to General Public

The Village Mission Clinic is popular with local residents and non-Tongans living in Tonga and also provides an excellent service for visitors to the Kingdom. The medical consultation service provided by the Village Mission Clinic is very well respected having been in existence for 30 years. The Clinic aims to have experienced general practitioners mainly from New Zealand and Australia who are able to provide a truly holistic primary medical service, though it can be difficult to achieve this goal.

The Clinic aims to conduct all its affairs with a high ethical standard in keeping with its Christian stance. It seeks to work cooperatively with other doctors and clinics in

the Kingdom, especially those of the Ministry of Health. Over the years the Village Mission Clinic has earned a reputation as a clinic where people are treated fairly regardless of social status, and where they can obtain a full assessment and explanation of their condition.

General Practitioner Position

To carry out its mission statement, the Village Mission Clinic requires a well-trained and experienced general practitioner because he/she generally has to “stand alone” without the support of fellow GPs or a strong hospital specialist service. Some help has been given by local Tongan doctors, but most work full time for the Ministry of Health so are available only evenings or Saturdays, and they have not had GP training. Ideally we are looking for long-term people who will commit at least a year and make an effort to understand and learn the local culture and language.

However short-term health professionals can also make a valuable contribution not only with the service they offer patients but by encouraging and mentoring the local staff.

Accommodation is usually arranged prior to a volunteer’s arrival in the Kingdom, the amount is to a specific limit. Staff at VMC/P usually try to get an idea of the volunteer’s needs and then find something to suit within budget. The current living allowance is \$500 Tongan Pa’anga per week. This is enough for 2 people to live on simply. The clinic pays for registration and visa costs (that are payable in Tonga) and may also be able to pay for a return airfare from Auckland if a doctor stays for six months or more. This work requires the good will and support of health professionals and others associated with it. The attraction of this position is not money but the interest and challenge of working in a different environment.

The Clinic’s opening hours are 8.30am – 5pm Monday to Friday and 10am – 1.30pm on Saturday. These are long hours but, although there is plenty to do, the pace is slower than most overseas clinics so short term staff will have plenty of time and energy left for making the most of everything Tonga has to offer. There is also flexibility to allow for working in other areas of interest.

Health professionals who come to work in Tonga need to prepare for a different working "climate". Services you may usually refer patients to are much more limited than in countries such as New Zealand, Australia and USA. Standards of other health services and professionals may not meet expectations. Patient presentations, behaviours and responses can be different. We need to be patient, compassionate, good-humoured, and able to make-do and improvise.

Also there are few checks in the health system in Tonga so in order to keep its excellent reputation and for the sake of the patients, the Village Mission Clinic looks for doctors who are committed to a high standard of work especially in areas of honesty, accountability, compassion, ongoing education and commitment to the job, even though no one is checking up.

The Clinic and Pharmacy also seek staff who will respect traditional Tongan culture, but also encourage lifestyle that is consistent with physical health and with godly, moral standards, and always uphold the sanctity of human life from conception to death.

This clinic is not linked to a specific church denomination, missionary or humanitarian organisation, but arose out of the desire of the founders (Dr Glennis Mafi and her husband Manu Mafi) to be the voice and hands of Jesus Christ to the people it would

serve. Dr Mafi, and many of those who have worked in the Village Mission Clinic have an holistic approach to medicine, looking for, and aiming to deal with underlying spiritual problems from a Christian perspective, while of course respecting the religions of all who come and treating all with gentleness and love. Where appropriate they would encourage people to know Christ personally, allowing him to impact the problems they face and to read and live by the Bible.

However there have been, and will be people who can assist in the work who do not have this Christian commitment and passion, but who serve compassionately and to a high standard. So the Village Mission health services look for Christian staff or those who will respect the Christian origins of the organisation, even if they do not identify themselves personally as Christian and who will maintain an appropriate standard of behaviour in and out of the clinic. This is also important in the setting of Tonga, where the Christian church and its standards are very important to a large sector of the population.

Staff also need to agree to follow best business practice as much as possible but accept that the service is not driven by financial profit, but by the desire to provide a high quality service at as a low a cost as possible for the people of Tonga. Charging is set by the clinic and administered by pharmacy. Local staff and visiting doctors are expected to comply with this system.

Current staffing of Pharmacy and Clinic

General Practitioner: Vacant as of February 2016:

General Practitioner and Specialist Physician (Fridays): Dr Taniela Palu

Nurse Assistant and Translation: Pele Tonga (Tonga), employed since 2000

Pharmacist/Manager: Jasmin Dodge (NZ), from March 2012

Pharmacist Assistant: 'Amelia Latu (Tonga), employed January 2014

Registration and Work Permits

Registration

In order to practice medicine in Tonga, registration must be granted by the Medical and Dental Practice Board of Tonga, Ministry of Health. There is an application form which must be approved prior to applying for work permit. It requires with accompanying documents, including copies of qualifications, certificate of good standing, current practising certificate, birth certificate and character and professional references. The council meets only monthly (and sometimes a lot less often than this) so application needs to be lodged as quickly as possible. The best way to do this is to keep a copy for yourself and e-mail and post the hard copy to the clinic staff, who will take it to the Registrar of the Board, whose name is Tu'akoi Ahio.

Work Permit/Employment Visa

A visa is required for people for anyone intending to work (including volunteer) in Tonga. This application needs to be submitted with a registration certificate (above), evidence of professional qualifications, a signed job contract and two recent passport

photos. If applying to work for longer than six months, the application requires two written character references, police record/certificate and a health check. It is well worth doing these if there is any chance you may stay for longer than six months. This process is to be completed before you arrive in Tonga, strictly speaking, but as long as it has been submitted for approval you will be able to enter on a provisional work visa. Often immigration allows the doctor into the country and finalises the visa, including stamping the passport, after arrival.

Please keep a copy for yourself and e-mail and post the hard copy to the clinic staff to take to immigration. A family can share one form if only the doctor will be employed while in Tonga.

About Tonga

Tonga is a small island nation, the only constitutional monarchy in the Pacific, and a great place to live and work especially with a young family. There is enough need to assure you that you are really making a difference in your medical work. Primary medical care, is very limited in Tonga. Admittedly, compared to many more deprived countries Tongans are well off, but compared to NZ and Australia they have a long way to go and the Village Mission Clinic & Pharmacy have made a real impact on extending the services and medicines that would otherwise not be available. Doctors and pharmacists from New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Holland, USA, Philippines, Nigeria and Norway have worked there and all offered their unique contribution.

From the point of view of a family, it is friendly, safe, warm and humid but without real extremes of climate, and no really nasty diseases or snakes. The beaches are close by, it's a simple life-style and it's just a few hours from NZ and Australia. There is a great community of expats and a range of leisure and volunteer opportunities available. Examples of volunteer work include: assisting with at a centre for adults and children with disabilities, remedial reading at the local English language school, children's sporting activities, animal welfare and so on. There are English speaking kindergartens, primary and secondary schools with a variable academic standard, but with a lot else to offer – more specific information available on request.

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The Joy of the Lord is our Strength!