

Field Report

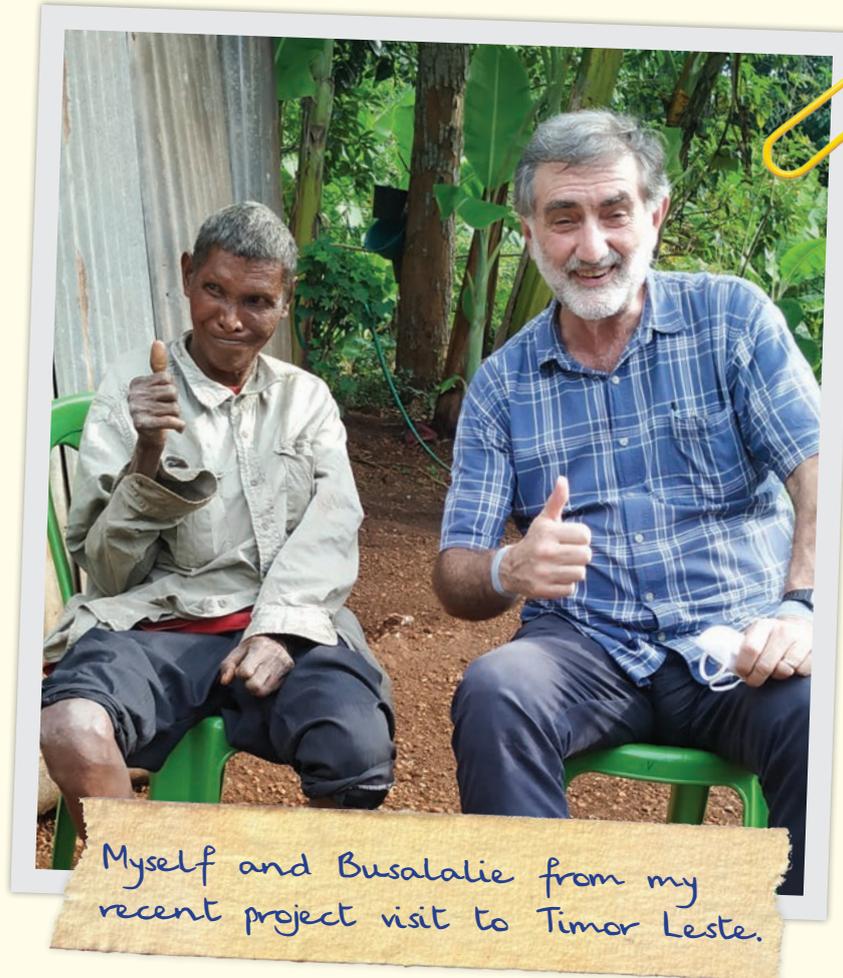
Where: Timor Leste Dili, Baucau



When: 23 – 31 May 2022
First visit post-COVID

Why: Assess impact of projects supported by The Leprosy Mission Australia (TLM) in partnership with the Australian Government

Who: Andrew Newmarch,
Project Manager



Summary: You might be surprised I begin my Field Report with a photo like the one you see here.

I have done so because - despite the challenges confronted by our TLM team in Timor Leste, especially the impact of COVID - there is a resilience and passion and commitment that is transforming the lives of people like Busalalie.

When the team first met him, he was too scared to receive treatment for his leprosy. The ulcers caused by his leprosy were uncared for and smelt. His hands were clawing, and his knuckles swelling. He lived in a broken-down shack, was depressed and felt rejected.

Your team from The Leprosy Mission persisted, and finally won the trust of Busalalie.

They visit him every month to check he is taking his treatment, and to bring him extra food. They even 'passed around the hat' among the team and gave their own money to build Busalalie a proper place to live!

Now, Busalalie's ulcers have cleared up. He's taken up gardening and growing pumpkins. Best of all, he is out and about in the community, no longer feeling alone and rejected.

What a tribute to the power of love and kindness to transform the life of someone with leprosy!

Faith-driven service: One of the blessings of the team we work with in Timor Leste is their faith. It's the 'X factor' that drives their passion to help.

Each day begins with devotion. Even at our Annual Country Learning meeting, attended by officials from Australian Aid, and reps from the NZ Government, the day began with devotion.

Father Eugenio, a Catholic priest on the Board of The Leprosy Mission in Timor Leste, led a reflection on integrated mission through the work of the Holy Spirit and the love of God that drives us.

I was pleased to note there was sign language translation for several attendees. There was also a group of vision impaired people, one tapping away on a braille laptop. We also had wheelchair-bound participants.

Aussie impacts: Francisco da Costa is the Project Coordinator for Integrated Leprosy Services in Timor Leste, whose work is supported by Aussies through The Leprosy Mission.

Francisco shared three successes:

- 972 people with leprosy cared for
- 24,077 people reached with advocacy materials
- 695 health staff were trained.

The result of this work produced:

- an increase in people getting contact tracing and screening
- better community health centres
- an increase in people receiving leprosy services
- a decrease in stigma and discrimination

Our challenges: While we thank God for these successes, Francisco also pointed out challenges:

- it's hard to find patients for screening
- few clinics have lab equipment
- patients and families are concerned about reactions to treatment drugs
- patients can be distracted by other activities – eg. earning a living to survive!
- the overstretched local Ministry of Health can afford less than \$1,500 a year on leprosy projects (which is why our Australian support is so vital)

I also note that while the team is totally dedicated, they can only follow up most patients a couple of times a year. They must rely on local health workers, and this is not sustainable. The increased grant from the Australian Government can help solve this challenge.



Virgilio has nursed people suffering the effects of Leprosy for nearly 30 years!

Passionate people: Virgilio da Costa Bomvida is one of the nurses supported in his work by Australians through The Leprosy Mission. He is the Leprosy and TB chief at the Baucau Ministry of Health.

Virgilio has supported people with leprosy for nearly 30 years. You can see by his smile the passion he brings to his work, and I saw first-hand how much he is trusted by his patients.

It's not just Virgilio. I marvel at how hard the whole team works, and their courage and commitment as they work in the poorest and most remote communities. Even through COVID, they still went door-to-door to find new cases of leprosy, to get treatment started before needless disability could set in.

Virgilio told me the hard slog and long days were essential because people felt too shy to come to the clinic because of stigma. (We still have work to do on this!)

Virgilia also explained another challenge. COVID had delayed shipments of MDT drugs, and some patients were using drugs like prednisolone that had expired. This caused adverse reactions.

This is why the increased Government Grant is vital to get in fresh MDT and medicines as soon as possible! Together with the grant, you will help us get it to those who desperately need it.

CASE STUDY Nadia Correia:

The Leprosy Mission first met Nadia in 2017.

As you can see in the photo on the right, Nadia had skin patches from leprosy. She was brought to hospital, but they had no facilities to do a Slit Skin Smear (SSS) test, so she was diagnosed at a Catholic clinic.

Nadia was given MDT (Multi-Drug Therapy), and took it for 7 months, then on and off for 14 months. The family explained this was partly due to running out of MDT, but also because it was some distance to go to the clinic to get more.

The other challenge was that Nadia had reactions to the medications. This led our Leprosy Mission nurse, Virgilio da Costa Bomvida, to bring Nadia Prednisolone and new MDT.

Nadia kept taking MDT until her course was completed, but a year later got sick again. Virgilio gave her more MDT, and also took her back to the Catholic clinic for an SSS. This confirmed the leprosy had come back.

Virgilio didn't give up though. He extended the dose of MDT for another three months, and the good news is the leprosy patches have now cleared up!

You can see Nadia's happiness in the photo on the right. In the photo below you can see Nadia with her mum and brother. Her brother, and two other family members, have also been diagnosed with leprosy following an SSS, and are now receiving MDT supported by Aussies through The Leprosy Mission. They too are making positive progress like Nadia.

As I reflect on Nadia's Case Study, two key things strike me.

First, how blessed we are to have hard-working, committed front-line staff like Virgilio. It was his diligence, and the trust he'd built with the family, that allowed our support from Australia to bring healing from leprosy to this family.

Second, I see that we still have more work to do in raising awareness of leprosy. This is needed right across the community, to get past stigma, and to support the local health care system in Timor Leste deal with leprosy themselves.

Again, the increased Australian Government Grant will be vital in working toward this.



Before: Nadia developed skin patches because of her leprosy



After: Thanks to you, her MDT treatment has cleared her patches!



Nadia with her mother, brother and Virgilio

New opportunity! When people struggle with a disease like leprosy, sometimes they don't feel satisfied with being diagnosed by a nurse – even though nurses may have the most experience in dealing with leprosy.

That's why I was so excited to see the initiative of your local team from The Leprosy Mission in employing newly-graduated young doctors.

In fact, in Timor Leste there is a 'glut' of young doctors, with many not being able to get jobs. The Leprosy Mission has sent four of these young doctors to Anandaban in Nepal to learn more about the effective treatment of leprosy. Their new expanded skills can then increase the leprosy awareness and skill-base across the medical system in Timor Leste.

This is what is exciting about the increased Australian Government Grant – it enables us to look at new ways of doing things, and take advantage of opportunities to increase our impact.

Stronger partnerships: I met with three staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), based in the Australian Embassy in Dili:

- . Program Coordinator: Nutrition, Disaster Management and Australian NGO Cooperation Program
- . Senior Coordinator Health
- . Disability expert

DFAT recognise the challenges of working in Timor Leste after the impact of COVID, and are very supportive of the work of The Leprosy Mission. They understood the problems associated with procurement of MDT drugs and would like to assist if possible. I am very encouraged by their support, and confident we can make our partnership even stronger.

DFAT also support our plan to be more focused as we push past COVID. This is exactly how they are thinking for their own programs in Primary Health Care. They even offered to add leprosy questions to their baseline survey work.

The New Zealand Government is keen to join us Aussies in supporting our neighbour Timor Leste as they fight leprosy. We even had the Second Secretary from the NZ Embassy join us for a time of shared learning.

My hope is we can build an ANZAC-spirit partnership to fight leprosy in Timor Leste!



Ursula can barely walk yet somehow manages to look after her husband, 8 children and the new local community water pump!

Our amazing sister in mission: Let me finish this report as I started, by sharing about the amazing people taking our Australian help to people in need.

Meet Ursula. She could only go to school to Grade 2 and has a disability that barely allows her to walk. Her husband has a mental health condition that requires her care ... plus Ursula has 8 children!

Yet Ursula leads the way in her community in managing a new water-pump that Australian Aid (through The Leprosy Mission) has built in her village.

For the first time, 40 families – 200 people – have clean safe water at their doorstep. The new water supply has stopped water-borne disease, improved health and hygiene, and provides for drinking, cooking, washing and irrigation.

Each month Ursula collects a small amount from each family to cover the cost of electricity to run the pump, and cover maintenance. Ursula is happy to do this, and says:

"It is a miracle that this water has come to us ... we pray this help can be given to others too!"

I truly believe the increased 5:1 Government Grant for our work in Timor Leste is a special gift at this time – one that can make more 'miracles' happen for people with leprosy, and facing poverty and disability. I join those people in thanking God for what caring Australians are doing through The Leprosy Mission.

Andrew Newmarch.