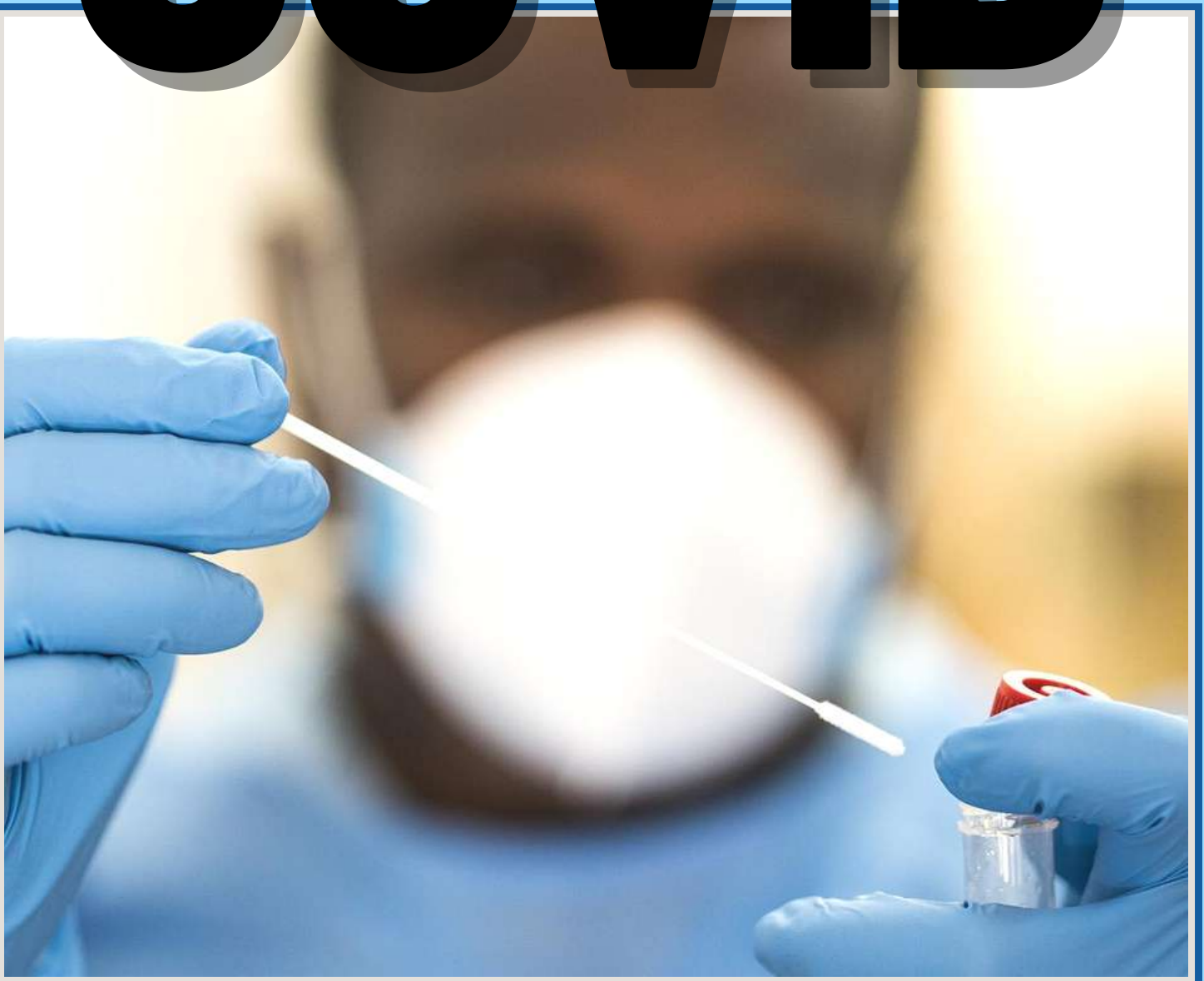


LEADERSHIP

in the shadow of

COVID



Stories of women & men who showed extraordinary leadership
in the shadow of the COVID-19 outbreak in Vanuatu

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and supported by:



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By Ginny Stein

History has shown that the most significant challenges are from which unexpected leaders and heroes often emerge.

When asked to write this publication, I leapt at the chance. Here was an opportunity to write the first draft of Vanuatu's COVID pandemic history, but to write it from the point of view of those on the frontline and behind it.

With the nation's borders now open again after more than two years, it comes with the realization of just how lucky Vanuatu has been to survive the ravages of this global pandemic with just 14 confirmed deaths.

Vanuatu has a history of imported diseases. A single measles epidemic in 1866 killed thousands.

But as these stories show, it was not luck that kept us safe. Although, yes, there was undoubtedly some of that.

The real reason is the work of many who made it so. They have been faceless and nameless until now. I am grateful that they all agreed to speak with me.

I sincerely thank Balance of Power for allowing me to tell their stories.

I came to Vanuatu as a freshly minted Master of Disaster Resilience nearly five years ago.

I expected cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and maybe a tsunami. Nowhere was a global pandemic in my thoughts.

For the past two years, I survived this pandemic from within the safety of Vanuatu's island bubble, but with an eye on the outside world, watching nervously as the global death toll rose and fearing what would happen if the Delta variant came to town.

The virus was an invisible force, bringing death, suffering, and hardship to billions.

The fear of the virus in Vanuatu was real. I can remember where I was, as I am sure you can too when the news of the first confirmed case was announced.

And again, when the first case of community transmission was whispered, then made public.

I have asked everyone on these pages to rate on a scale of 1-10 how lucky they believe we have been.

But 14 people will never get that chance. I hope that one day, someone will write their stories.



Saints and Sinners

DR. MINADO PAUL

Time shifts shape during a pandemic. Days seem longer but they also blur; weeks become months. It's hard to remember when things began, to pinpoint moments in time.

When did the pandemic start? How great was your fear?

Doctor Minado Paul, a specialist physician at Vila Central Hospital, is brave enough to admit she was frightened. We sat down to talk about what it took to find the courage to lead others and just do her job.

The nation's fears spiked in Vanuatu when the first positive COVID case was announced in November 2020. The nurses who looked after that first patient, a young man who had returned home from the United States, were stigmatised by those closest to them and by hospital staff.

This was at a time when images and news from the outside world were quite simply terrifying.

People were collapsing and dying in the streets, struggling to find oxygen tanks, and the pursuit of a vaccine was by no means certain.

I first met Dr Paul when she addressed a staff meeting at the Vila Central Hospital. She was fearful of standing up in front of her colleagues, but she stuck with what her profession had taught her, to make decisions based on the best science available.

She stood before her peers and encouraged them to get vaccinated.

"The best vaccine is the one in your arm," she told a foyer full of doctors, nurses and support staff.

The message was short and sweet but no small feat, particularly when your other deepest held conviction, your religion, is calling on you to dismiss science-based truths.

Since that day, almost two years ago, Paul has been part of the team-building systems for the day when COVID reached the community.

Reflecting on those early days of the pandemic, when medical and quarantine staff were fighting hard to contain COVID and prevent it from spreading into the community, she singles out one moment that gave her the courage to lead.

"At one point, there were no nurses available to swab people in quarantine. I watched as Dr Sereana Natuman, my boss, came and swabbed people. At that time, we were all wearing Level 4 PPE. If she could do it, so could I," Paul said.

Learning to lead by example is something she rates as her biggest achievement.

Paul said she has grown through this pandemic. Learning to lead by example is something she rates as her biggest achievement. But Paul is also willing to admit what some struggle to say. Despite the best efforts and intentions, Vanuatu was not prepared for the pandemic. A small island nation with limited resources never could be.

But keeping the virus out for as long as Vanuatu did meant that when it did arrive, it was the highly contagious Omicron variant – and not the more severe Delta strain of the virus – that landed on our island.

Two years on, and with Vanuatu successfully navigating community transmission and reopening its borders, I ask her on a scale of one to 10, how lucky has Vanuatu been?

“8, although I want to say 9. Is that too much?” she said, laughing at her indecision.

In just two months Omicron swept through Efate at an extraordinary rate. Vanuatu now holds an unofficial and unclaimed world record for the speed of community transmission.

Lives have been lost, but vaccination efforts have kept so many safe.

Paul's words to describe the arrival of community transmission may surprise some, but not when you understand the pressure the health system and its people were under trying to keep Vanuatu free from the virus.

“It was a blessing in disguise. It was such a relief. Now we could get on with it,” she said.



Like so many hospital staff, Paul and her husband caught COVID.

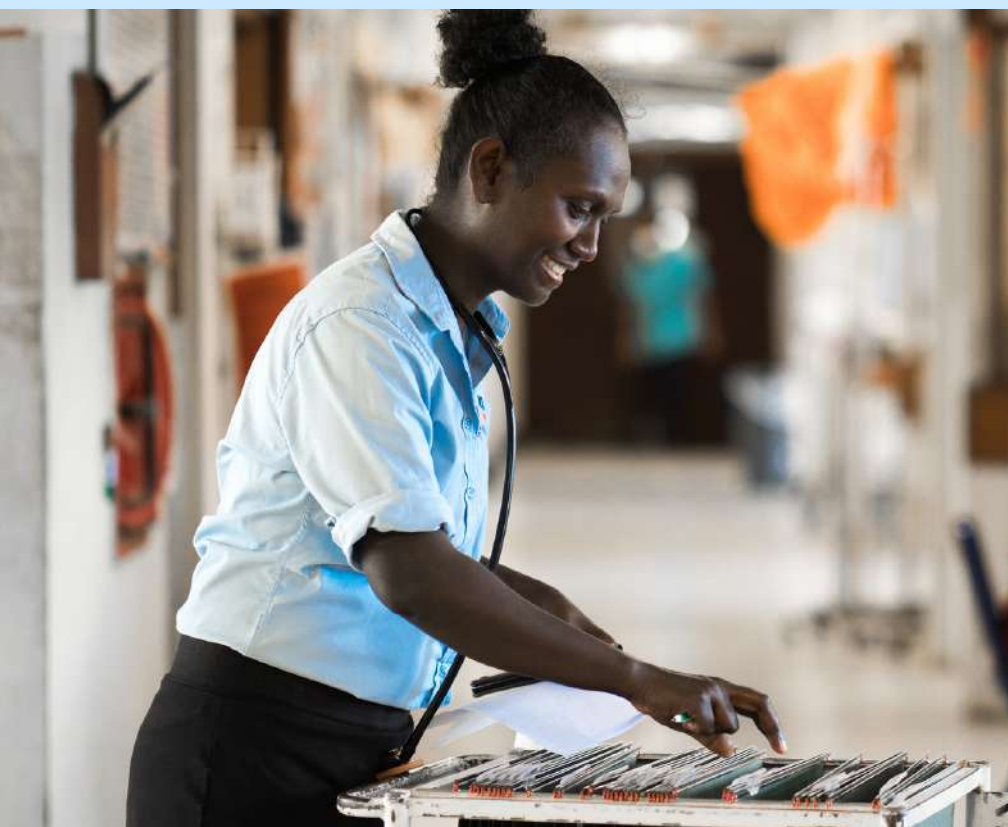
But she can see the positive side. In every disaster, there is an opportunity. Her husband, a surgeon at Vila Central Hospital, caught it first and then she did, too.

“For seven days, we got to rest, and we got to spend more time with our family. We didn't have to prepare school lunches. I keep telling people it was a blessing.”

Dr Paul ends the interview with one request.

“Please, I don't care what you write, but don't call me a saint or a sinner. Like so many, we did what we were paid to do. At no stage did we reach capacity. We were lucky.”

Perhaps not so much an 8, but a 9.



*But she can see the positive side.
In every disaster, there is an opportunity.*



Working Together

HAMISH GARAE

Police Chief Inspector Hamish Garae is going over his stats, ensuring the list of police who have tested positive for COVID is up to date.

"255 positive, 248 recovered, and seven down," he said.

For the past two years Chief Inspector Garae has commanded the day-to-day running of the Joint Police Operation Centre (JPOC).

This is where Vanuatu's police force got ready for COVID.

They planned, took part in exercises, and stocked up, making sure officers across the many islands of Vanuatu were also prepared with supplies of personal protective equipment.

Here at the JPOC, the pandemic's practicalities were discussed and contingencies were drawn up. Australian government advisers were on hand to offer support.

So much has happened in the past two years. I begin my chat by asking the Chief Inspector to reflect on the start of the pandemic.

In March 2020 Vanuatu's borders were closed, a state of emergency had been declared, and the nation was heading into the final days of a national election campaign.

And there was that small matter of a Category 5 cyclone about to rip a path of destruction through the nation's northern islands.

In Vanuatu and across the world, fear was a universal emotion. The death toll from COVID was rising at a phenomenal rate.

While the rest of the world was putting on masks and heading into lockdown, in Vanuatu people were crowded on buses on their way to election campaign rallies or huddling together in cyclone shelters and churches, waiting for Cyclone Harold to pass.

With the country's borders now closed, no one was coming in to help. Vanuatu needed to prepare for the pandemic from within.

Vanuatu's most senior police officers knew frontline officers would not be able to escape COVID when it came.

They needed to prepare to minimise its harm.

"This was like a disaster. We have had plenty of experience with those, but this is a new experience—a first experience working together with Health to try to tackle COVID. Every day is a new experience," Garae said.

"A first experience working together with Health to try to tackle COVID."

Police would play a key role throughout the pandemic, just as they had for many years leading the emergency response to disasters.

The prospect of authentic leadership arises in the most profound adversity.

“Our role has been to support Health with security,” Garae said.

A veteran officer who worked his way up through the force, with time out as an adviser in Bougainville, Garae has lived and breathed the pandemic for the past two years. He has developed a shorthand way of speaking about it and the role of the JPOC. I ask him to spell out what ‘supporting Health’ means.

“We provide security from the airport to the quarantine sites,” he said. “And we provide 24-hour security at those quarantine sites while people are there.”

Five sites are in use on the day I speak with Garae. Korman, where 97 people, mostly seasonal workers, spend their three days in compulsory quarantine.

There are another 55 people at the Ex-FOL site, 12 at Iririki Island Resort in the middle of Port Vila harbour, 20 at the Aquana Resort, and 20 outside of Port Vila at Tamanu.

Earlier in the pandemic there were 15 sites in use, each needing escorts and around-the-clock security, with police officers working across three shifts.



With every phase of the pandemic came changes to operational requirements. At all times, rosters had to be filled, people needed to get to work, and sick officers had to be covered.

“We kept it [COVID] out long enough to learn from other countries. And we had advisers who helped us,” Garae said.

Asked how he would rate Vanuatu’s performance during COVID on a scale of one to 10, he gives his country a 7.

There is relief and pride in his voice as he gives his reasons for his assessment.

“I’d say 9 if it was just down to luck. But we acted; we did things. We put in a lot of effort to ensure we kept COVID out.”

Chief Inspector Garae stands tall and is proud of the role Vanuatu police played in keeping the virus out of the country for as long as it did.



At all times, rosters had to be filled, people needed to get to work, and sick officers had to be covered.



Bae ol faol nomo i wokbaot

DR. SHEM JOEL & NURSE BARRY SANIEL

If you are one of the more than 9,000 people who travelled back to Vanuatu over the past two years, the chances are that Doctor Shem Joel and Nurse Barry Saniel have come up close and personal to your nostrils.

They have been the lead frontline swabbing team testing for COVID through the many phases of this pandemic.

How many tests have they done? No idea.

"Maybe a thousand?" Dr Joel said.

It's been a blur.

But I thought that was a stat worth knowing, so I went looking and found the numbers.

More than 6,161 people have been swabbed since testing began in quarantine in September 2020.

Most have been tested twice, sometimes three times, so at minimum that's 12,000 tests. Oh, so many nostrils.

These swabs have included testing the close contacts of the Filipino sailor who washed ashore and tested positive for COVID, and the young ni-Vanuatu man returning from the United States who would become Vanuatu's first positive case, as well as thousands of others quarantined in hotels and other facilities relieved to be returning home to the safety of COVID-free Vanuatu.

The testing teams, like Joel and Saniel, have been a crucial frontline force.

But behind the scenes, decisions made during the pandemic have played a vital role in keeping COVID, particularly the deadly Delta variant, out of the country.

In August 2021, the number of citizens and residents returning had escalated to the point that testing and monitoring were overwhelmed.

At the same time in Australia, COVID cases were increasing. Strong measures taken in Australia had assisted Vanuatu, but even in comparatively well-resourced Australia, their health and security systems were being stretched.

Senior health officials in Vanuatu, acting on advice from its epidemiological team inside the SHEFA Province Health Office, urged the government to press pause, warning that Vanuatu was at its most unsafe moment and heading towards potential disaster.

The testing teams, like Joel and Saniel, have been a crucial frontline force.

Within five minutes of the phone call being made by the Director of Public Health, Len Tarivonda to the Director-General of Health, Russell Tamata, the government was notified and all inbound flights were cancelled, effective immediately.

A three-week pause allowed Health teams to reassemble and refocus and keep Delta out of the country.

This was a single behind-the-scenes act of leadership that those in the know believe potentially saved hundreds of people's lives. And particularly those on the frontline, such as the swabbing teams.

Dr Joel labels Vanuatu's success at the top of my arbitrarily designed one to 10 scale of luck.

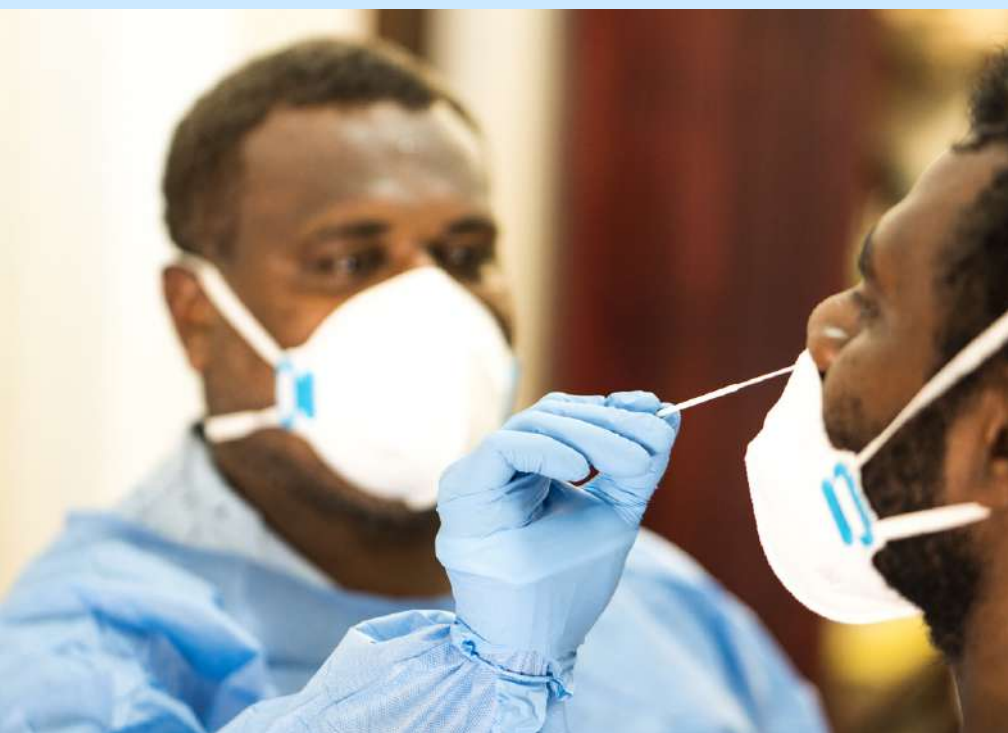
"A 10, it's because of our way of living," he said.

"Omicron is very transmissible. We share our food, take kava, and many people are in our houses."

He said the one good thing from the pandemic is that people better understand the need for improved hygiene practices to keep viruses at bay.

At the start of the pandemic, there was great fear about what would happen when COVID arrived in a country with historical awareness of the devastating impact of imported diseases.

"Bae ol faol nomo I wokabout" or "only chickens will be left to roam" became a feared lament.



"We know what happened in the past, like on Erromango," Joel said.

The island of Erromango bore the brunt of imported diseases which its Indigenous people could not defend themselves against or receive proper treatment for.

A popular destination for Australian and English sandalwood traders and missionaries, the population of Erromango shrank in less than 100 years from about 4,500 people to less than 500 people by 1930.

But this time Vanuatu stood firm.

The action of many people working together, along with a healthy dose of luck, geography and help from our neighbours all played a role.

"One good thing from the pandemic is that people better understand the need for improved hygiene practices."



Facing the World

ESLYN KALTONGGA

In Vanuatu, a nation of many islands, the ocean connects people to each other and to the outside world.

With the ancestors of these islands arriving by sea, the ocean has been the bridge between the living and the dead.

In 2021, when the body of a COVID-positive sailor from the Philippines washed ashore, Vanuatu's COVID-free bubble was burst.

The arrival of the body into what was then an unvaccinated but COVID-free nation would quickly test the country's decision-makers and countless others on the frontline.

It would also push the limits of Vanuatu's resources and show how fear takes hold in the absence of clear and accurate information.

A three-day lockdown of Efate was ordered.

With the onset of the global pandemic, Vanuatu had retreated from the outside world; it now needed to call on its diplomatic skills to finesse a sensitive situation.

Eslyn Kaltongga, the senior protocol and consular officer at Vanuatu's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the point of contact between the government of Vanuatu and a large and distraught Filipino family.

The family of 46-year-old Nicomedes Tiangan Sasana was divided geographically across islands in the Philippines, but united in wanting his body flown home.

At the start of the global pandemic, much was still being learned about the virus and how transmissible it was.

It was to Kaltongga that so many turned. She was the person in the middle, on the phone and online constantly, as she oversaw efforts to secure a way to send the body home.

"The airlines had strict protocols," Kaltongga said. "In the end, they just wouldn't allow that to happen."

An alternate solution was needed and "one that could be understood and accepted by all".

"We had to make sure the Filipino family understood the circumstances that we were in," Kaltongga said.

And so it was that a month after his body washed ashore, Sasana was buried in a tomb at the Port Vila Municipal Cemetery.

Eslyn was the point of contact between the government of Vanuatu and a large and distraught Filipino family.

Kaltongga stood by, watching as the coffin was lowered into a tomb.

She had ensured the funeral service was live-streamed to his family. Alongside her were senior hospital staff.

Everyone was dressed in protective clothing and wearing masks.

It was a very dignified send-off.

From that day to now, this behind-the-scenes bureaucrat has played a pivotal role in Vanuatu's COVID response.

From assisting with repatriation flights and getting people home, liaising with the government, and ensuring policies and protocols are followed.

Kaltongga grew up around politics on both her mother's and father's sides of the family.

When I ask her what her most significant challenge throughout this time was, she declares it to be political interference but then counters:

"I think we did a really good job keeping COVID out for two years. It was good decision-making.

We had a good team, who stood their ground, made decisions, and ensured our people were safe.

If COVID had come at the start, I think a lot of people would have died."

On a scale of one to 10 of how fortunate Vanuatu has been, Kaltongga said it's a 5.



"We had protocols, and we stuck with them."

But the most important aspect was role-modelling.

"For me, it was about bearing in mind that you are setting an example for your future generation," she said.

With a blended family of three girls, a son, and another child soon to arrive, she prides herself on getting the job done.

"I did it with a good team behind me. Team MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) supported me all along the way."



She had ensured the funeral service was live-streamed to his family.



Wan shot nomo!

GEORGINA BULE

Leadership? What is it? What defines it?

Decisive, dedicated or service are just some of the words that come to mind.

If a picture could speak words, this one might. When it circulated on social media, it indeed spoke to many.

When we put a call out to the people of Vanuatu to nominate individuals for this profile series, this photo of a community nurse on Pentecost Island, trekking through a mud swamp to deliver vaccines, drew the most significant response.

So we set out to track her down, and we found her.

Georgina Bule is a community nurse at Pangli Health Centre on her home island of Pentecost.

The first thing she said when we ask her about that day is: "That was not a river; it was a mud swamp."

Bule has worked at the Pangli Clinic since 2006.

She planned her career with a singular purpose in mind.

"I wanted to become a nurse because I saw that people in my community needed help," she said. "I wanted to help them because sick pikininis and older people, and especially pregnant mamas, had to travel such a long way to get treated or give birth."

We asked her about that day the photo was taken, which she began by vehicle but ended up on foot after the road petered out.

Bule was part of a small team of medical staff and volunteers who had worked hard to map out the logistics of delivering vaccines to some of the most remote villages on her island.

Now they were on the road taking the COVID vaccine to villages scattered across the mountainous eastern part of the island.

"The road to Tsimbwege village is made for horses and people, that's all.

The path was crazy, with huge potholes, some knee-deep. Deep in the forest, it started raining further uphill, causing all the water to gather on the road.

I was walking through mud pools, one after another with my esky, holding it up high."

Getting there was extremely arduous.

"Let me say it was the first time in my life to take part in this kind of a journey.

I was 40 years old; it was so very tiring."

Now they were on the road taking the COVID vaccine to villages scattered...

But it was not the most challenging part of the outreach trip.

When the team arrived, the villagers of Tsimbwege were excited to see them.

Their Chief had prepared the people of the village, letting them know about the arrival of the vaccination team.

"The Chief told them that just like after cyclones, when the government provides food and supplies, we were being sent to do the same thing again, to look after them."

Phone and internet reception is sparse in this part of the island, but social media disinformation about the COVID vaccine had reached Tsimbwege and nearby villages.

The team arrived in Tsimbwege late in the day. It was now their base camp for the week. The following day Bule's group split up.

One team stayed to vaccinate the local villagers; another went to a nearby village.

At the second village, the vaccination team received a lukewarm reception with only a handful of villagers waiting for them.

Everyone else had disappeared.

Later that night, when the Chief and the rest of the villagers returned, there was an angry argument.

Huts were burnt, and kitchenware and other household goods were destroyed.



"The Chief was very angry with those who got vaccinated because he had told them no one was to accept or get vaccinated. He then exiled those who had been given the vaccine."

Bule feared that the Chief might come after them. She said she has learned many things from this pandemic. Until now, patients have come to her. For the first time, she went to see them.

"It wasn't easy. I taught myself to be strong, even when wrong information about the COVID vaccine was happening. I had to become a leader, to stand strong, and find alternatives to problems and challenges," Bule said.

Will she be going back? A second dose? She is laughing with relief at the other end of the phone.

"It was Johnson and Johnson. Wan shot nomo!"

"I had to become a leader, to stand strong, and find alternatives to problems."



Finding a Way

LINDA SEWEN

Air Vanuatu is a passenger-focused airline. That was until the pandemic hit, and then it was not.

COVID grounded not just Air Vanuatu, but all the world's airlines overnight.

Globally, the industry was confronted by its most significant disruption since aviation began.

As one of the world's smallest airlines, with just two international aircraft – a Boeing 737 and a smaller regional ATR aircraft – options for Air Vanuatu were limited.

"We are probably like every other airline.

We've taken a hard battering," said Greg Wilson, the head of Air Vanuatu's commercial operations.

Across the world, as major airlines were flying aircraft into deserts in the United States and Australia, in search of dry conditions and low humidity to reduce the potential for corrosion of their fleets, Air Vanuatu was looking for ways to keep its aircraft flying.

Grounded for six months from when the borders closed, the airline was thrown a lifeline.

The country was closed to tourism, but charter flights carrying seasonal workers to Australia would keep the aircraft in the air.

But that alone was not enough, with many staff laid off or on suspended pay.

As the pandemic progressed and international shipping was disrupted, Air Vanuatu staff began looking to new markets.

Globally, with shipping also disrupted, there was a rush to convert passenger planes to freighter craft.

Cargo Manager, Linda Sewen was tasked with finding a freight forward future for the airline, using its two leased aircraft.

Its Boeing could carry 7,500 tonnes of freight; the ATR aircraft just 1,500 tonnes.

Removing the seats of the passenger aircraft was not an option, as both planes would need to remain available for passenger flights.

Linda Sewen was tasked with finding a freight forward future for the airline, using its two leased aircraft.

"The airline's first foray into freight-only operations was a steep learning curve that would test both Linda Sewen's mettle, and that of the airline.

"At that time it was something we had never done; we had never run any freighter flight," she said. "I had many questions."

To find answers, Sewen had to look outside of Air Vanuatu. She began calling industry colleagues overseas.

"Our first freighter flight on 24 August, 2020 to Auckland, I remember correctly, it went out empty and returned with just 24 kilos," she said.

"I couldn't sleep, I thought of myself as a failure, but I knew we had to persevere to show our customers that we could do this."

Freight forwarding involves many moving parts and operators carrying out different roles in different countries. Communication is key.

When a fully loaded flight chartered to carry mail out of Vanuatu to Fiji looked like taking off without the mail, as it was loaded last and then offloaded when the flight was too heavy, Sewen took matters into her own hands.

"The plane was getting ready to take off. I told the drivers to go and tell the pilot to stop, but they said it was too late."



Sewen would not take no for an answer.

"I went out to the aircraft, the engines were running, and I went like this, waving to make him stop."

The mail made it through.

And now, from nothing to start with, flights regularly carry thousands of kilograms of cargo on each freighter flight.

A baggage handling crew travels with each flight to offload and reload by hand. When the plane lands, a new baggage handling crew meets it to unload cargo, often perishable goods or medical supplies vital to a nation of small islands in the Pacific.

Air Vanuatu has had to rebuild its freight forwarding links to the world. Linda Sewen knows she has played a vital role in making that happen. And of that, she is proud.



"I couldn't sleep, I thought of myself as a failure, but I knew we had to persevere."



Challenges on the Frontline

REX TURI

It's a magical day on Havannah Harbour and Rex Turi has the throttle at full speed. His banana boat is skimming across the water. He slows momentarily to point out a turtle. Predictably, I miss it.

He laughs and turns the throttle up a notch once more.

We are on our way across the bay to his office, the health clinic on Moso Island.

As the head nurse in charge of the vaccination rollout across North Efate and its offshore islands, this is how Turi gets to work most days.

He jumps in and out of his boat effortlessly, greeting a group of people sitting by the shore before making his way through the village to the clinic.

There he's met by two third-year student nurses taking part in their first community placement. They will be among the 30 nurses who graduate this year from Vanuatu's College of Nursing.

The student nurses are on the same journey Turi took 10 years ago.

When he began his career in nursing, it was not so much a choice, but an instruction from his grandfather, Dick Saliak, a 'treasure' or community healer.

Turi remembers his grandfather telling him that this was the path he must follow to ensure that his people from the offshore island of Lelepa, continued to be looked after.

His grandfather died the year before Rex Turi graduated, but in a speech Dick Saliak prepared before his death, which was read at his funeral, he spoke of how proud he was of his grandson.

Today, inside Moso's four-room clinic, we sit and talk about the challenges frontline nurses faced throughout the pandemic, and what it's like to work in communities outside of Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila.

The misinformation that has swirled around the internet, primarily on Facebook, posed the biggest problem for health teams working to support the vaccination rollout.

"This community is just the same as Port Vila. They have new technology and the internet. Everyone goes to social media and the internet to look for information, and it causes them to panic," he said.

As a health educator, he was confronted by a sceptical and mistrusting community. It taught him the importance of speaking confidently and with authority about what he knew.

We are on our way across the bay to his office, the health clinic on Moso Island.

At times he was frustrated by the reluctance of some individuals to decipher vaccine facts from fiction.

"The principle of this vaccine is the same as all others. It is not a cure; it's there to prevent disease," he said.

Turi was honoured to deliver the first dose of the vaccine.

It went into the arm of Opposition Leader, Ralph Regenvanu.

He admits he was nervous on that day, and so it seemed was patient number one.

"I made a little joke that we would take a shell [of kava] together later in the afternoon, then he laughed," Turi said.

Turi said his years as a nurse have taught him how to make people feel relaxed and trust him, but the pandemic has been challenging and continues to be.

"My photo giving vaccines has been circulating on social media by people saying the vaccines are no good; it has made me worried that something might happen because of what people are saying."

Turi has had to ask himself hard questions throughout this pandemic.

The biggest one is how he would respond if the deadly Delta variant came to Vanuatu.

"We nurses are not insured. If something happened to me, who would look after my family?"



Turi rates Vanuatu's luck during the pandemic as 9 out of 10, but said preparation by health workers and others involved in the country's COVID response means he is ready to knock a couple of points off the 'good luck' index, offering a final score of 7.

But there is one area where it could have all gone so wrong – the lack of PPE or personal protective equipment available to nursing staff.

"We would get a little, and then we would have to wait for more supplies," he said.

If Delta had come to Vanuatu instead of Omicron, Rex Turi and I know that one or both of us may not be sitting here talking to each other.

Turi was honoured to deliver the first dose of the vaccine. It went into the arm of Opposition Leader, Ralph Regenvanu.



We are an Island

HANNAH PHILLIP

When Hannah Phillip switched careers, from tourism to shipping at the start of the pandemic, she could not have imagined the role she would ultimately play in keeping Vanuatu's vital supply lines open to the outside world.

Like the rest of its Pacific Island family, Vanuatu is united by the ocean; the seas are its highways.

The nation's seafaring heritage has been built up over hundreds of years.

Today more than 90 percent of trade throughout the Pacific is carried by ship.

It's not just what comes in, but also what goes out: fish, copra, cacao, and kava.

Making a career switch at this point in her career, at the start of a global pandemic, Phillip knew she was on a steep learning curve.

One minute she was doing accounts at a luxury resort, the next she was a human resources manager, working for a shipping agent whose role, in essence, was to keep ships moving.

Every container that cannot be unloaded in one place is a container that cannot be loaded somewhere else.

When demand for global shipping is at an all-time high, any hitch means delay and extra cost for someone. Shipping costs have more than doubled since the pandemic began.

Phillip learned quickly that the logistics of bringing a ship into port are complex and involve many people.

From the captain who guides the ship into the harbour, to the shipping and customs agents who clear goods and pay charges – and, of course, during a global pandemic, the medical officer who goes on board to clear the crew before the ship can dock.

For Phillip and staff at Tropical Agency Limited, vaccination among staff was the first hurdle that needed to be cleared. To overcome fear, including her own, Phillip raised her arm to be among the first women to be jabbed in an office of three men and nine women.

"I thought leading by example would speak louder than just talking," Phillip said.

She was a human resources manager, working for a shipping agent whose role, in essence, was to keep ships moving.

The next step was to put in place plans to ensure the office would continue functioning when COVID came to Vanuatu.

Shipping was high on Vanuatu's list of essential services. If the shipping agency was forced to close, ships would be stranded.

The supply chain and the delivery of critical foodstuffs and medical supplies to the people of Vanuatu would be cut.

Tropical Agency Country Manager, Mark Pardoe said running costs continue to climb each day a container ship sits offshore waiting to dock.

"It can be 15,000 to 20,000 US dollars per day. You've got crew wages, you've got fuel, and then a delayed schedule to every other port around the Pacific," he said.

Panic set in when the first case of community transmission was announced in Vanuatu in March 2022, two years after it arrived in most of the rest of the world.

"There was a lot of misinformation going around," Phillip said. "There was a lot of fear about coming to work."

New COVID-safe business practices that had been developed were quickly put in place. Across the shipping industry, contactless cargo deliveries were already an entrenched practice. Now it was time for people onshore to put procedures in place to keep them safe. Staff were rostered onto separate teams, with one group working reduced hours in the office and the others at home. Transport was arranged for staff travelling to work. "We did not have to use public transport, which made us all feel safer," Phillip said.

But in the scramble of the first days of responding to COVID – now spreading across Vanuatu's main island of Efate – came news that a large container ship offshore was being prevented from berthing at the container wharf on Vanuatu's northern island of Santo.

The container vessel, Papuan Chief, was loaded with medical supplies, refrigerated and frozen food, and dry stores.

In total, 140 containers were waiting to be offloaded. And sitting on the dock were more than 20 containers loaded with copra, cacao, and kava. The global supply line was in danger of being broken.

For 36 hours, it was all hands-on at shipping agent Tropical Agency as negotiations took place across key government agencies and departments, with support from the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council. Panic had overtaken reason. Calm heads needed to be restored.

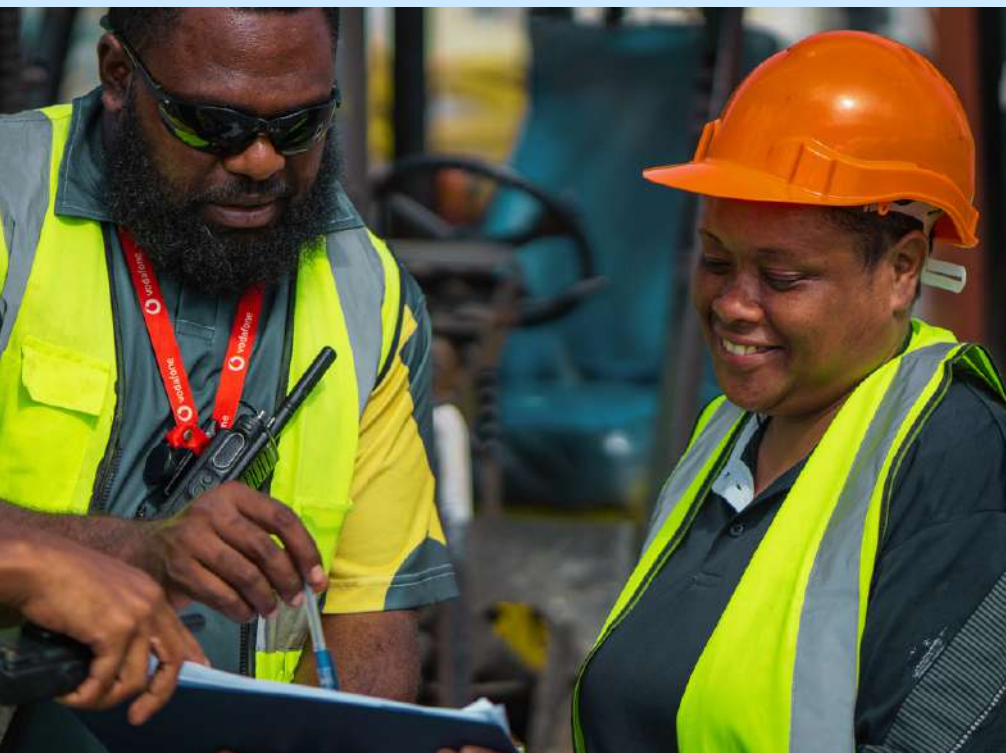
"There was a lot of pressure," Phillip said and then laughs, shaking her head as she remembers back to that time.

"In shipping, each day brings its own unique set of problems. But you know, it is about solving problems each day. COVID was particularly stressful for us as managers. We needed to have a forward-thinking mind, to see ahead."

Country Director Mark Pardoe is full of praise for Phillip and her role in implementing new work practices and looking after staff wellbeing throughout the pandemic.

"Hannah has been a pillar of strength during COVID; she was someone I could bounce ideas off," Pardoe said.

It's the work of many that is keeping things going.



"I thought leading by example would speak louder than just talking."



Connecting the Dots

KALI AMEARA

When I ask him about the role he played as quarantine manager, implementing and overseeing a system that kept COVID out of Vanuatu for more than two years, this quietly spoken man suddenly chokes up.

He is caught surprised at the tears running down his face.

Kali Ameara is a medical scientist. More specifically, he is a virologist. Born and raised in Vanuatu, Ameara is a Central School graduate, but until last year he had never held a job in his own country.

"It is just . . . I feel very privileged to be in this position," Ameara said, struggling to speak. "I am a passionate person."

He also knows how close Vanuatu came to a very different outcome. The deadly Delta variant was detected in Vanuatu amongst returnees, but it never escaped the quarantine centre. In total, 25 active cases were picked up and safely contained.

There is no doubt Ameara was the right man in the right place and with the right skills.

The medical scientist has spent a career in virology and worked in a London teaching hospital during the first outbreak of the viral respiratory disease, SARS.

He just happened to be visiting his sick mother in Vanuatu when the borders closed.

After a moment to collect himself, Ameara apologises and then states emphatically that he wants to continue the interview.

"It's important," he said.

From March 2020 until June 2022, 205 flights brought 10,439 people home to Vanuatu; more than 80 percent were ni-Vanuatu citizens.

Together they spent 129,732 nights in hotel quarantine.

It was not until March 2022, more than two years after the pandemic began, that the Omicron variant escaped due to a suspected quarantine breach.

Vanuatu had detected its first case of community transmission.

Omicron then did what Omicron is good at. The virus spread fast. It was detected across all six provinces in Vanuatu within a few months.

"Yes, it was disappointing, but we knew that something like that was going to come; we just didn't know how, but it was inevitable," Ameara said.

There is no doubt Ameara was the right man in the right place, with the right skills.

"Our main focus had been to keep it out of the community because we have such a highly vulnerable population. We knew if Delta came, it would be devastating."

So just how lucky was Vanuatu, I ask? On a scale of 1 to 10. Ameara, the scientist, is reluctant to put a number on it. He pauses, taking time to think, and then declares it a 5.

"I think luck was a component of it, but I give it a 5 out of 10 because we decided to resist pressure to open up our borders, to give us time to get ourselves ready.

"Yes, we could have done more, and many businesses are struggling, but I think we had to look at the wider community.

"Our vulnerable population is quite high.

We've got the elderly, we've got the young kids, and we've also got a high incidence of NCDs."

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and heart disease are Vanuatu's leading causes of death.

"People say we are lucky, but I think having systems in place, being patient, is what got us through."

Sitting in front of three whiteboards with names, numbers and flow diagrams all over them, I ask Ameara to take me through all the moving parts it took to set up Vanuatu's quarantine system.



He said the most significant challenge throughout the response was communication, from hotels to hospitals to health departments and security.

Who was who? And who needed to be contacted to work together to get things done?

"My career as a virologist helped a lot because I understood what was going on. I had confidence in the way we were doing things," Ameara said. "There was much fear, but we had to look at who was doing what, where they were coming from, who was doing the transport, the monitoring, the testing, and all that. Once you start with that, you try to put things together."

But why is it that Ameara had never worked in Vanuatu until now? After completing his degree in New Zealand, he found his first job there. He then moved to Australia, where he met his wife. After they married, they went backpacking through Asia and onto the United Kingdom, where he worked in London at a major teaching hospital.

There was no job for him in Vanuatu back then. But this time around, his timing was right. It was his time to lead. And for that, Ameara feels so very privileged to have been given the chance.



The most significant challenge throughout the response was communication, from hotels to hospitals to health departments and security.



Truth - Telling

LEAH LOWONBU

Francis Herman had a plan. The CEO of the national broadcaster, the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation knew it might ruffle some feathers, but these were far from ordinary times. Herman and his executive team had worked for months on the station's COVID protocols.

They wanted to ensure the broadcaster could still operate come the day COVID made it into the community. No one knew when that might be, but they knew it had to happen.

For two years, Vanuatu had been fortunate to keep COVID at bay, partly due to closed borders, maintaining strict quarantine protocols, and luck, but miracles don't last forever.

This was the deal when the time came. An emergency team would be locked inside the State broadcaster for weeks or months. A bubble within a bubble to ensure vital news and information would continue to be broadcast despite what COVID may bring.

Two outside teams would rotate in shifts to keep news and programming flowing. It was a bold idea aimed at keeping the news on air.

Herman asked his leadership team for names. They put forward the station's most experienced broadcasters. But he knocked them back, turning instead to 'generation next', a team of 16 broadcasters and operators, all in their twenties, and he added a chef to keep them fed.

As a team, they would need to pull together and stand tall against their detractors, which included some of their senior colleagues. But the most significant battle would be getting hold of vital public health information to share with their audience.

For two years, the news team had been broadcasting about the impact of the global pandemic and the ravages of the Delta variant. Everyone inside and outside the bubble knew the limitations of Vanuatu's health system.

It had been decided that Leah Lowonbu would be the face of the news. She would work alongside Online Producer Brenda Daniel and Editor Essen Jack. They agreed to live and breathe the news from within the station. For Lowonbu, the decision to join the team was based on her commitment as a journalist to keeping the nation informed.

She knew that meant she would be separated from her eight-year-old-daughter Meriam, but for how long she had no way of knowing. The one fallback she had was an extended family she could call on to look after her daughter.

She knew that meant she would be separated from her 8-year-old-daughter.

When news of the first case of community transmission leaked to the station in late February 2022, the same day the positive test was taken, the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) immediately began calling to round up emergency team members.

"At the time we knew we were safer inside than outside.

"It was pretty challenging at the start, communicating with our bosses and colleagues outside because we were all young; everyone was young, and we were in there running it," she said.

It would be a further six days before the public was informed. Operating under the Health State of Emergency, the VBTC team knew they had to wait until they had official confirmation before releasing the information.

In the months leading up to the bubble call-up, team members had felt pressure from some senior staff who questioned whether the 'Skeleton Team', as they called themselves on a group chat, would be able to get the job done.

Only now is Lowonbu willing to admit that she almost didn't make the pickup to join the bubble inside the station. Her phone was off. When she turned it on, it came alive with missed calls and messages.

The proof was in the making.

They came together and got the job done, supporting each other throughout.

Lowonbu can laugh now, but she does so in the realisation of how close she came to missing out on making it inside the station and playing a pivotal role in bringing news to the nation.

The biggest challenge was gaining access to information and sharing it.

It took the Vanuatu Government three days to publicly acknowledge the first COVID case, by which time community transmission was widespread.



"All the way through, we tried to get the authorities to release information on the hotspots to bring awareness to the public," Lowonbu said. "We made so many calls and sent so many messages."

Inside the station, the team worked as one.

"We created an environment where we really worked well together. It was an environment where everybody could support each other," she said.

"We began each day with a devotion, and then we would discuss things and if someone had achieved something, we would tell them how we appreciated them."

The most challenging time for Lowonbu came when her daughter contracted COVID. Her mother looked after her.

She brought Meriam to the station when she had recovered, but Lowonbu was still not able to go close to her daughter. They waved at each other through the fence.

Looking back, I ask Lowonbu how lucky she rated the outcome for herself, the team, and Vanuatu as a nation.

"Definitely, an 8."



They came together and got the job done, supporting each other throughout.

COVID Leadership



in PICTURES



Leadership in the shadows of COVID