



An insight into paediatric oncology in New Caledonia with Dr Gregory Harvet.

In the lead-up to ANZCHOG's 2022 Annual Scientific Meeting, we are talking to some of the special guests that will be attending this year's conference in Sydney.

As a part of our work with SIOP Oceania, ANZCHOG is supporting 10 delegates from the Pacific Islands to attend our 2022 ASM. This will provide a valuable opportunity for these clinicians and nurses to network, learn and raise awareness of the challenges they experience providing the best care and treatments for Pacific children diagnosed with cancer and their families.

Dr. Gregory Harvet is the only paediatric oncologist in New Caledonia, working at the island's sole hospital in Noumea. Dr Harvet completed his medical degree and specialised training in his native France, initially as a paediatrician, then with further qualifications in paediatric oncology and haematology. Since then, he has practised all over the world, including the United Kingdom, Reunion (a French Island near Madagascar) and Vietnam. Despite this wide variety of experiences, Dr Harvet admits he was surprised by the more limited facilities in New Caledonia when he arrived 3 years ago.

“With a population of 250,000 people and only 10 childhood cancer patients per year, our ability to diagnose and treat children with cancer is limited. We do not have the laboratory and radiology facilities required to accurately diagnose paediatric patients, nor the certifications required to deliver chemotherapy via infusion. High quality paediatric care relies on input from many different areas, and we simply do not have access to these facilities.”

Unlike many of the Pacific island nations, New Caledonia is a French territory, and the French Government supports children to travel to Australia (Children's Hospital at Westmead) or France to undergo comprehensive diagnostic testing and receive their oncology treatment. Dr Harvet acknowledges that this is not an easy time for families, sometimes requiring re-location for up to one year.

“Travelling to Australia is difficult, and many families do need to rely on assistance from charities – here and in Australia – for accommodation and other essentials. But parents

regularly tell me how happy they are with the quality of care provided, and the amount of support and kindness they receive from the treatment team and care providers.”

After their treatment, children can return to New Caledonia, where follow up and support is provided through the hospital. Dr Harvet acknowledges that services can be difficult for some patients to regularly access unless they live close to Noumea.

“New Caledonians expect the same quality of care that is available in France. Sometimes it can be a challenge to live up to these expectations.”

Of course, a model of care which is reliant on international travel was severely impacted by the restrictions imposed during the COVID pandemic, with more patients having to travel the longer distance to France to receive their treatment.

Dr Harvet is optimistic about making some changes in the coming years. “From an initial audit I have conducted, children in New Caledonia have similar outcomes to those in France. This is very encouraging, and any changes that are introduced would need to ensure that these survival rates are maintained. In the future, I would love for patients to receive more chemotherapy, where possible, here in New Caledonia. I think we will need to continue to have the diagnostic work up and development of the treatment plan abroad, but more of the treatment could be done here. The first step towards this is to establish a core team that is well-trained and committed to staying in Noumea in the long term.”

Dr Harvet is attending the ANZCHOG ASM and is particularly looking forward to meeting the staff from Children’s Hospital at Westmead. “It will be the first time I will meet most of them in person – we have a lot to thank them for.. they treat our children like their own.”

A dedicated session with the ASM program has been scheduled in the afternoon of Friday 29th July, where a range of speakers will discuss current initiatives in paediatric oncology in Oceania.

As well as attending the ANZCHOG ASM, international delegates from New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, Tonga, Fiji and Hawaii will also be participating in a full day workshop on the 27th July 2022. SIOP-Oceania Continental President, Professor Claire Wakefield shared that the workshop “aims to focus on the development and support of child cancer care in the Oceania region. While children diagnosed with cancer in Australia and New Zealand are able to benefit from incredible treatment innovations and clinical trials, children in our neighbouring countries have far fewer opportunities to receive the best possible care. It is our hope that over the next few years, SIOP Oceania, together with ANZCHOG and our many global partners, will help to improve outcomes for families across our entire region.” The SIOP Oceania workshop has been generously supported by SIOP and World Child Cancer Charitable Trust.

Article written by Dr Janelle Jones & Professor Claire Wakefield