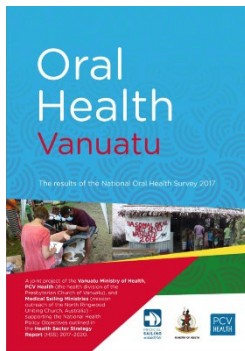


Evolution of the Gudfala Tut Skul Program, Vanuatu

A tenet to hold

“Dental NGOs and volunteers working in disadvantaged communities around the world do so with the best intentions and with high motivation. Regrettably, the impact of this engagement on oral health at the population level remains rather low. This is mainly due to the choice of inappropriate approaches, the failure to integrate their projects within existing health care systems and the lack of sustainability.”¹



This declaration by van Palenstein Helderma and Benzian, quoted in the report of the first full National Oral Health Survey (NOHS), Vanuatu 2017, has remained a key aide-memoir for the creators of the Gudfala Tut Skul Program (GTSP) since the program was first trialled in 2018. Thus, the creation of the Integrated Oral Health Unit under the Directorate of Public Health in early 2019, a key recommendation of the NOHS report. And the first ever National Oral Health Policy 2019-2023 provided the initial impetus for raising local awareness and leadership in oral health in Vanuatu.

The genesis of Gudfala Tut Skul Program

In late 2018 Mr Len Tarivonda, who was the Public Health Director at the time, asked a specific question of three representatives of Medical Sailing Ministries Inc. (MSM) meeting together in his office regarding ideas for introducing a simple public oral health program in Vanuatu, “What do you consider to be the low-hanging fruit?” The answer on hand was a report on a supervised toothbrushing pilot study, “Gudfala Tut Skul Projek”, conducted by MSM in 2018 at Vila Central School. This study clearly demonstrated significant and sustained reductions in plaque accumulation index scores in grades 1 and 6 primary school classes and grade 9 secondary school classes over a period of 20 weeks.

Through its partnership with PCV Health in Vanuatu and the appointment of Dr Jenny Stephens, the first head of the Integrated Oral Health Unit, GTSP was officially endorsed by the Ministry of Health Medical Executive Committee and launched under local leadership in early 2019, targeting grade 1 primary and kindergarten children at six primary schools in Port Vila and Luganville. MSM provided all the kits, including written instructions, class posters, toothbrushing record booklets, disclosing gel, hand mirrors, toothbrushes, hygienic toothbrush storage containers and toothpaste funded through donations, fundraising, and key sponsorship of Dentalife Australia P/L and Orien Dental Supplies.



The evolution of the Gudfala Tut Skul Program

Later in 2019, having evidence from the pilot study and endorsement of the Vanuatu Ministry of Health, GTSP became eligible to apply for a FDI World Dental Federation World Dental Development Fund Grant. The successful application enabled MSM to expand the program to 17 schools and kindergartens in 2020.

Through friendship and support of Fellow, Dr David Goldsmith, the ICD Section VIII provided a special grant in 2018 towards the cost of printing and publishing of the NOHS Report. Again, in 2020, having an intimate knowledge through participation as a team leader for the NOHS and an interest in our work in Vanuatu, David encouraged MSM to apply for an ICD Section VIII grant. The first of the four successful ICD grant applications to date enabled further expansion of GTSP in 2021 to cover 33 schools and kindergartens as well as the cost of translating the GTSP documents into Bislama and French languages.

International Recognition

Whereas the FDI WDDF grant was for a limited period (2 years) and provided an excellent catalyst, the ICD Section VIII grants awarded successively in 2020-2023, as well as a grant from the ICD Global



Visionary Fund this year, have helped expand the program to around 70 schools and kindergartens in 2023. More importantly, through ongoing support of ICD Section VIII, GTSP came to the notice of the WHO National Professional Officer for NCDs in

Vanuatu who in turn brought it to the attention of the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office in Manila, Philippines. Consequently, WHO extended an invitation to Vanuatu to contribute to the WHO Bank of Ideas. The article, facilitated by MSM, can be accessed here [Vanuatu - Gudfala Tut Skul Program \(Healthy Tooth School Program\) - Oral Health Country/Area Profile Project \(mau.se\)](#)

Furthermore, recognising the value of GTSP as a growing public health program, WHO provided funding in 2022 to employ an Oral Health Coordinator based in Port Vila. This role also included responsibility for coordinating a new public health project, Gudfala Smile Nurse Training Program, instigated by MSM to help address early childhood caries in the age group birth to 5 years.

2023: Weathering Storms and Setbacks

The year 2023 began with positive news . . . the Vanuatu Ministry of Health, Directorate of Public Health appointed another dentist, Dr Rhoda Bule, to the vacant position of Head of the Integrated Oral Health Unit, replacing the previous incumbent, Dr Jenny Stephens, who had been affirmed in the position of Director of Public Health in 2022. Then came some major setbacks. Firstly, two

intense tropical cyclones ripped through Efate (including Port Vila) in March causing significant damage to school buildings, including GTSP kits and materials. PCV Health, where the Gudfala toothpaste for GTSP is mixed, also lost part of its roof and caused significant delays to toothpaste



production and packing of GTSP kits. Some schools were also closed for several weeks. Although schools in Luganville were unaffected, the shipping of materials from Port Vila was delayed.

Fortuitously, with the help of ICD Section VIII, MSM successfully applied for a grant from the ICD Global Visionary Fund to cover the cost of replacing kits and materials. However, significant delays caused one or two schools to miss out this year. Secondly, the WHO-supported Oral Health Coordinator, who had been making an excellent contribution throughout 2022, was diagnosed with a serious illness requiring 12 months medical leave to undergo treatment. Despite storms and setbacks, the year ended with positive news!

At the End of the Rainbow



In August this year, MSM co-founding Director, Mr Robert Latimer, and retired dentist, Dr Barry Stewart, attended a two-day Vanuatu National Oral Health Policy 2019-2023 review meeting

chaired by Dr Rhoda Bule, Head of the Integrated Oral Health Unit and acting Oral Health Coordinator. Among participants were representatives of the Ministries of Health and Education, PCV Health, two INGOs (including MSM) and WHO, including Dr Yuriko Harada representing WHO Oral Health Programme Headquarters, Geneva. Several presentations were delivered, including an overview of the WHO Global Oral Health Action Plan (2023-2030), and the Ministry of Health confirmed the most welcome news that it would be embedding the GTSP supervised toothbrushing model under the Health Promotion in Schools Program (HPS).

To save costs and drawing on its experience and findings of the 2018 pilot study, MSM had confined GTSP to age 4-7 years i.e., children attending kindergartens and grade 1 primary school levels. Selection of this target age group also appealed to evidence reported in the literature that life-long habits, including those related to promoting good general and oral health, are best introduced as early as possible during childhood.

With the GTSP model coming under HPS and government funding, the supervised toothbrushing will in future become available to more schools and a broader age group i.e., grade 1 and above. MSM will continue delivering the GTSP model in kindergartens and playgroups with a change of name to Gudfala Tut Program (GTP) i.e., dropping 'Skul'. In addition, MSM will continue supporting the Gudfala Smile Nurse Training Program as its primary focus on oral health prevention in Vanuatu reaches for the next row of 'low-hanging fruit' i.e., prevention of early childhood caries in children from birth to 5 years.

On behalf of the children and our Ni-Vanuatu colleagues, a huge thank you to the ICD Section VIII Board and all Fellows for continuing to support oral health prevention in Vanuatu.

¹van Palenstein Helderman W, Benzian H. Implementation of a Basic Package of Oral Care: Towards a Reorientation of Dental NGOs and Their Volunteers. *Int Dent J*, 2006;56(1):44-8.

Barry Stewart

blstewart17@gmail.com

<https://msm.org.au/gudfala-tut/>