

**A PILOT SURVEY TO ASSESS THE VITAMIN A STATUS OF
CHILDREN AGED 6-72 MONTHS IN THE RAMU REGION OF
PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

By

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Arzt fur Augenheilkunde**

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A treatise submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Clinical Ophthalmology

Faculty of Medicine

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

.....

Nitin Verma

DEDICATED TO THE CHILDREN OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA



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I did not realise that what started out as a casual discussion in the economy class cabin of an Air Niugini Airbus, would ever become a research work. This thesis would not have been completed without the help of many people who would become involved in this project. To them, and any that I may have omitted to mention, I am very grateful.

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Nitin Verma

FORWARD



"Every thousand mile journey begins with one small step"

Anon

The author was the Chief Ophthalmologist of Papua New Guinea from 1994 to 1997. This project was undertaken in response to a question of the vitamin A status of children in the country that remained unanswered for a long time and was the subject of some controversy and concern between the medical fraternity and the UNICEF representation in PNG.

The role of Vitamin A in the growth of children and in the maintenance of good health is becoming increasingly apparent, as are the subtle, yet serious, consequences of its deficiency. The classical ocular signs of Xerophthalmia subsequent to vitamin A deficiency (VAD) are a rarity in clinical practice in PNG. Observed ocular changes suggestive of VAD in PNG are often secondary to debilitating illnesses such as measles and tuberculosis in children. The problem of malnutrition in mothers and children is very real and the causes, multi-factorial. Deficiencies of other micronutrients possibly co-exist with VAD. These need to be addressed in addition, if one were to offer a holistic solution to the problem of high childhood morbidity and mortality that exists in PNG.

Based on an earlier study, Papua New Guinea has been classified by the WHO as a country where clinical Vitamin A deficiency exists and suggestions have been made to fortify foods so as to improve the intake of this vitamin. Singular administration of Vitamin A is fraught with the danger of taking the focus of involved governmental and non-governmental agencies away from the bigger problem of malnutrition and

infectious diseases, which are multifactorial in their occurrence. In addition, the dangers of Vitamin A toxicity are well known and therefore mass fortification of foods with the vitamin on a national scale needs to be looked at with some caution.

Papua New Guinea has a high infant mortality rate and it is quite possible that Vitamin A deficiency has some part to play in the increased prevalence of childhood infections. The per capita expenditure on health in many developing countries is low and PNG is no exception. Every dollar needs to be carefully spent and the health problems of the people and the possible solutions need to be addressed in a careful manner.

This pilot study was undertaken to resolve this matter on a scientific basis and to pave the way for larger studies that need to be carried out in various parts of the country so that a national policy or guidelines could be formulated.

While the survey was going on, what can be described as one of the largest multi-disciplinary health patrols in the history of Papua New Guinea was carried out. Using boats, a barge, fixed wing aircraft and 2 helicopters, sixty health personnel were engaged in a nutritional survey, surgical eradication of cataract blindness, immunisation and provision of general medical services in one of the most remote and under served areas of Papua New Guinea. Feeding, housing, moving and looking after them in rural PNG was a task in itself. This effort was endorsed and supported by the PNG Department of Health and many Non Governmental organisations and individuals. Their help has been gratefully acknowledged earlier.

Health care delivery in developing countries is difficult because of many reasons and it is hoped that surveys such as this would in their own way give some direction to policy makers in the Government. This would give the people who participated in the

survey a lot of satisfaction by making their efforts and personal sacrifice more rewarding and meaningful.

The main report attempts to be relevant to lay people without sacrificing content. I have left out a lot of details from the body of the report to try and make it uncomplicated and readable. I have tried to support the assertions with references and the figures and tables with statistical details but have not included any references to any appendix sections in order to keep the text and diagrams in the main body of the treatise, simple.

Nitin Verma

Darwin 2000

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES



FIGURES	PAGE No.
1.1 PNG POPULATION PYRAMID	78
1.2 POPULATION DISTRIBUTION	81
1.3 POPULATION DENSITIES IN PNG	82
1.4 PROVINCES WITH WORSE IMR (1991-1980)	85
5.1 AGE DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN	157
5.2 BIRTH ORDER OF CHILDREN	158
5.3 SERUM RETINOL vs RBP	164
5.4 SERUM RETINOL vs. AGE	165
IN APPENDIX 3: NUTRITIONAL DATA	257
WHAT THE FAMILY ATE YESTERDAY	
WHAT GROWS IN THE GARDEN	
FOOD EATEN YESTERDAY MORNING	
IN APPENDIX 7: ANTHROPOMETRIC DATA	275
WEIGHT OR HEIGHT Z SCORES	
HEIGHT FOR AGE Z SCORES	
WEIGHT FOR AGE	
HEIGHT vs. AGE	
HEIGHT FOR AGE PERCENTILES	
HEIGHT FOR AGE MEDIAN (HAP) vs AGE	

WEIGHT FOR AGE PERCENTILES

WEIGHT FOR AGE Z SCORES

WEIGHT FOR AGE MEDIAN

WEIGHT vs HEIGHT

MID UPPER ARM CIRCUMFERENCE

HEIGHT FOR AGE (STUDY versus NCHS POPULATION)

TABLES**PAGE No.**

1.1	VAD IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGION	49
1.2	SERUM RETINOL AND CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS	53
1.3	CLASSIFICATION OF XEROPHTHALMIA	53
1.4.	CLINICAL DEFICIENCY. XEROPHTHALMIA (IN CHILDREN 6-71 MONTHS OF AGE)	53
1.5	FUNCTIONAL INDICATORS: NIGHT BLINDNESS	54
1.6	SERUM RETINOL: MINIMUM SAMPLE SIZE FOR ANTICIPATED PREVALENCE WITH RELATIVE PRECISION OF 20% AND 50% AT 95% CI LEVEL	55
1.7	CLASSIFICATION OF VAD BY SERUM RETINOL	57
1.8	COMPARISON OF SENSITIVITY AND SPECIFICITY OF CIC AGAINST DIFFERENT INDICATORS OF VAD	63
1.9	PREVALENCE OF ABNORMAL CIC IN CHILDREN 24-71 MONTHS OF AGE AND MINIMUM SAMPLE SIZE FOR IDENTIFYING A VAD PROBLEM	64
1.10	SUMMARY OF INDICATORS	74
1.11	TYPES OF INDICATORS USEFUL IN ACHIEVING BROAD SURVEILLANCE OBJECTIVES.	76
1.12.	RELATIVE RANKING ON A POPULATION BASE OF SOME BIOLOGICAL INDICATORS USEFUL IN SOME SURVEILLANCE PURPOSES	76
1.13	ILLNESS RELATED INDICATORS IN CHILDREN 6-71 MONTHS OF AGE	77
1.14	SOCIOECONOMIC INDICATORS (SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION)	77
1.15	THE CORE INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE GOAL OF THE VIRTUAL ELIMINATION OF VAD BY 2000 AD	77

1.16	IMR BY PROVINCE 1980 1991	86
1.17	LEADING CAUSES OF NEONATAL DEATHS	88
1.18	MALNUTRITION RATES IN THE 10 WORST DISTRICTS IN PNG 1982	92
1.19	NUTRITIONAL STATUS	93
1.20	IMMUNISATION COVERAGE RATES IN INFANTS < 1 YR OF AGE	100
1.21	IMMUNISATION COVERAGE RATES BY PROVINCE 1994	101

RESULTS:

4.1	AGE AND SEX DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN IN THE SURVEY (n=609)	142
4.2	AGE AND SEX DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION STUDIED IN DETAIL (n=106)	142
4.3	ORIGIN OF PATIENTS BY REGION	143
4.4	HISTORY OF NIGHT BLINDNESS IN CHILDREN > 24 MONTHS OF AGE	143
4.5	OCULAR CONDITIONS	143
4.6	SERUM RETINOL	144
4.7	SERUM RETINOL IN BOYS	144
4.8	SERUM RETINOL IN GIRLS	144
4.9	BETA CAROTENE LEVELS	144
4.10	RBP LEVELS	145
4.11	KERATINISATION STATUS OF CELLS	145
4.12	CELL POPULATION ON SLIDES	145
4.13	ONE WEEK DIARRHOEA RATES	147
4.14	ONE WEEK FEVER RATES	147

4.15	ONE WEEK COUGH RATES	147
4.16	IMMUNISATION STATUS	147
4.17	BCG VACCINATION	148
4.18	HEPATITIS B VACCINATION	148
4.19	TRIPLE ANTIGEN	148
4.20	MEASLES VACCINATION	148
4.21	SABIN VACCINATION	148
4.22	WEIGHT FOR AGE	149
4.23	MID ARM UPPER CIRCUMFERENCE	149
4.24	MUAC IN BOYS	149
4.25	MUAC IN GIRLS	150
4.26	SIZE OF SPLEEN	150
4.27	ASSOCIATED CONDITIONS	150
4.28	HAEMOGLOBIN	151
4.29	MALARIA SLIDES	151
4.30	RESULTS OF EYE EXAMINATION	151
4.31	VITAMIN E LEVELS	151
4.32	PREALBUMIN RESULTS	152
4.33	TOTAL PROTEIN RESULTS	152
4.34	CHOLESTEROL LEVELS	152
4.35	TRIGLYCERIDE RESULTS	152
4.36	C REACTIVE PROTEIN RESULTS	152

IN APPENDIX 3:

257

- 4.37 FOOD COOKED IN OIL. (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.38 INTAKE OF DGLV
- 4.39 PAWPAW EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.40 INTAKE OF DGLV: CHINESE CABBAGE (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.41 PUMPKIN EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.42 BANANA EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.43 USE OF COOKING BANANA (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.44 TOMATOES EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.45 MANGOES EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.46 SWEET POTATO EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.47 GUAVA EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.48 TARO EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.49 CLAMS/ MUSSELS EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.50 WHOLE FISH EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.51 LIVER EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.52 CARROTS EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.53 AVOCADO EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.54 YAM EATEN (DAYS/WEEK)
- 4.55 WHOLE MILK CONSUMED. (DAYS/WEEK)

IN APPENDIX 4:

265

- H1 DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY VILLAGE
- H2 CHILDREN/HOUSEHOLD
- H3 OVERALL NUMBER OF CHILDREN/HOUSEHOLD

- H4 NUMBER OF CHILDREN BETWEEN 6-72 MONTHS
- H5 HOUSEHOLD INCOME
- H6 METHOD OF INCOME
- H7 EDUCATION LEVEL OF MOTHER
- H8 MAIN SOURCE OF WATER FOR THE HOUSEHOLD
- H9 DISTANCE OF WATER SOURCE FROM HOUSE
- H10 MAIN STAPLE FOOD
- H11 WHAT THE FAMILY ATE TODAY
- H12 WHAT THE FAMILY ATE YESTERDAY EVENING
- H13 FOOD EATEN YESTERDAY EVENING
- H14 WHAT THE FAMILY ATE YESTERDAY
(DURING THE DAY)
- H15 WHAT GROWS IN THE GARDEN
- H16 FRUIT COLLECTED BY MOTHER IN THE PAST WEEK

DISCUSSION

5.1	SERUM RETINOL IN PATIENTS WITH POSSIBLE NIGHT BLINDNESS	161
5.2	SERUM RETINOL IN THE FOUR REGIONS	163
5.3	SERUM RETINOL AND RBP	164
5.4	SERUM RETINOL AND AGE	165
5.5	SERUM RETINOL IN PATIENTS WITH ELEVATED CRP	166
5.6	COMPARISON WITH OTHER STUDIES	168
5.7	β CAROTENE AND RETINOL	170
5.8	MEAN SERUM CAROTENOID VALUES: A COMPARISON	170

5.9	RBP LEVELS IN THE STUDY POPULATION	172
5.10	SERUM RETINOL AND RBP	172
5.11	RBP AND AGE	172
5.12	RBP AND PREALBUMIN	173
5.13	CRP AND RBP	173
5.14	RETINOL AND OTHER BIOCHEMICAL INDICES	174
5.15	ALPHA TOCOPHEROL AND TRIGLYCERIDES	175
5.16	BETA CAROTENE AND TOCOPHEROL	175
5.17	VITAMIN E AND AGE	176
5.18	WEANING FOODS	180
5.19	WEEKLY FOOD INTAKE	180
5.20	WEIGHT FOR AGE	183
5.21	MID UPPER ARM CIRCUMFERENCE	184
5.22	CRP LEVELS	195
5.23	SERUM RETINOL AND HAEMOGLOBIN	203
5.24	SERUM RETINOL AND PREALBUMIN	203
5.25	SUMMARY OF INDICATORS	208

TABLE OF CONTENTS



	PAGE No.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
FORWARD	9
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	13
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED	27
SOME RELEVANT WORDS IN PNG PIDGIN	30
SYNOPSIS	32
CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	35
1.1 INTRODUCTION	36
1.2 VITAMIN A (GENERAL)	36
1.3 EPIDEMIOLOGY OF VAD	38
1.4 MAGNITUDE OF VAD	46
1.5 DEVELOPMENT OF VAD	50
1.6 INDICATORS OF VAD	51
1.7 PROFILE OF POPULATION IN PNG	78
1.8 CHILDHOOD MORTALITY AND MORBIDITY PATTERNS	82
1.9 FEEDING PRACTICES IN CHILDHOOD	94
1.10 IMMUNISATION COVERAGE	98
1.11 FAMILY SIZE AND BIRTH SPACING. FAMILY PLANNING	101
1.12 ADDITIONAL MATERNAL HEALTH ISSUES	103
1.13 COMMUNICATION AND TRAVEL	106

1.14	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	107
1.15	HEALTH SERVICES	107
CHAPTER 2: OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY		112
CHAPTER 3: METHODS- HOW THIS STUDY WAS DONE		115
3.1	CHOICE OF LOCATION FOR THE STUDY	116
3.2	THE TARGET POPULATION	118
3.3	CONSIDERATIONS WHILE COLLECTING DATA FOR VAD ASSESSMENT	121
3.4	REFERENCE DATA	125
3.5	DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT	125
3.5.1	THE INTERVIEWS	128
3.5.2	PHYSICAL EXAMINATION	130
3.5.3	LABORATORY STUDIES	133
3.5.4	CONJUNCTIVAL IMPRESSION CYTOLOGY	134
3.5.5	SELECTION O HOUSEHOLDS AND CHILDREN	135
3.5.6	STAFFING	136
3.5.7	DUTIES OF DIFFERENT STAFF MEMBERS	136
3.6	ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO THE ACTUAL SURVEY	138
3.7	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	139
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF THE STUDY		141
4.1	THE POPULATION	142
4.2	INDICATORS OF VAD	143

4.3	BREAST FEEDING PATTERNS	146
4.4	DISEASE RATES	147
4.5	DIETARY PATTERNS	149
4.6	ANTHROPOMETRIC DATA	149
4.7	OTHER BIOCHEMICAL PARAMETERS	151
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS		153
5.1	THE AREA	154
5.2	STUDY BIAS	154
5.3	THE POPULATION	156
5.4	INDICATORS OF VAD	159
5.5	HISTOLOGICAL INDICATORS	176
5.6	INDIRECT INDICATORS	178
CHAPTER 6: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE		211
CHAPTER 7: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH		234
CHAPTER 8: APPENDICES		237
APPENDIX 1:	MAPS OF STUDY AREA	238
APPENDIX 2:	SURVEY FORMS AND QUESTIONNAIRES	243
APPENDIX 3:	NUTRITIONAL INDICATORS	257
APPENDIX 4:	FOOD RELATED DATA	265
APPENDIX 5:	HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS	268
APPENDIX 6:	COMMON HOUSEHOLD MEASURES OF FOOD IN PNG	272
APPENDIX 7:	ANTHROPOMETRIC INDICES	275

APPENDIX 7:	ANTHROPOMETRIC INDICES	275
APPENDIX 8:	STAFFING DETAILS	298
APPENDIX 9:	EQUIPMENT AND CONSUMABLES	300
CHAPTER 9:	REFERENCES	305

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS USED



ACC/SCN United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Subcommittee on Nutrition

AT	Alpha Tocopherol
AT/CT	Alpha Tocopherol/Cholesterol ratio
AUSAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BMI	Body Mass Index
CIC	Conjunctival Impression Cytology
CT	Cholesterol
DHS	Demography and Health Survey (1991-PNG)
DOH	Department of Health (PNG)
EPI	Expanded Program of Immunisation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
HAM	Height Age Median
HAP	Height Age Percentile
HAZ	Height Age Z Score
HKI	Helen Keller International
HPLC	High Pressure Liquid Chromatography
ICN	International Conference on Nutrition
ICT	Impression cytology with transfer
IDA	Iron deficiency anaemia
IDD	Iodine deficiency disorders
IEC	Information, education and communication
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
IVACG	International Vitamin A Consultative Group
KAP	Knowledge Attitudes and Practice
MCH	Maternal and child Health
MDIS	Micronutrient Deficiency Information System
MOMASE	Morobe -Madang-Sepik (region in PNG)
MSG	Monosodium Glutamate
MUAC	Mid Upper Arm Circumference
NDOH	National Department of Health (PNG)

NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NNT	Neonatal Tetanus
ORS	Oral Re-hydration Solution
ORT	Oral Re-hydration Therapy
PEM	Protein Energy Malnutrition
PMGH	Port Moresby General Hospital
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RDA	Recommended dietary allowance
RDR	Relative dose response
RE	Retinol equivalents
SEAR	South-East Asia Region
STD	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UPNG	University of Papua New Guinea
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VAD	Vitamin A Deficiency
VAST	Vitamin A Supplementation Trials
VITAL	Vitamin A field Support Project
WAM	Weight Age Median
WAP	Weight Age Percentile
WAZ	Weight Age Z Score
WHM	Weight Height Median
WHO	World Health Organisation
WHZ	Weight Height Z Score
WPR	Western Pacific Region

SOME RELEVANT WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS IN
PAPUA NEW GUINEA PIDGIN



Aeroplane	balus
Baby	pikinini
Blood	blut
Boat	bot
Breast Feeding Mother	Susu mama
Doctor	dokta
Eye	ai
Food	kaikai
Faeces	pekpek
Green leafy vegetable	kumu
Injection	sut
Man	man
Medicine	marasin
Milk	susu
Mother	mama
Night blindness	ai tu tak long nait
Sweet potato	kaukau
Water	wara
Woman	meri

SYNOPSIS



Papua New Guinea has been classified by the World Health Organisation as an area where clinical vitamin A deficiency (VAD) exists. This is at variance with the experience of the local physicians who do not encounter classical VAD in clinical practice.

This pilot study was carried out to resolve this contradiction, since many suggestions have been made to fortify foods with Vitamin A. If done in the absence of concrete data to back up this classification, it could take the focus away from the real problem as well as potentially create problems of Vitamin A toxicity. Therefore, answers from this study could have far reaching implications in a country such as PNG, which has high childhood mortality and limited financial and manpower resources.

The objective of this study was to determine the vitamin A status and identify risk factors of VAD in children aged 6 months to 6 years in a rural area of Papua New Guinea.

The survey was carried out in the Ramu region of Madang province. Households and children were randomly selected and standard questionnaires were used to collect information about diet, previous illnesses and night blindness. The weight and height of all children was recorded and an ocular and physical examination carried out by trained personnel. In addition, haemoglobin estimation and examination of blood films for malaria parasites was carried out in all the children. In a randomly selected number of children, estimations of serum retinol and other micronutrient levels were carried out.

Results: A total of 609 children were enrolled in the study. Biochemical parameters were studied in 106 of them .The mean age of the children was 35 months. Possible night blindness was reported in 4 children. No xerophthalmia was seen. The prevalence of serum retinol levels $\leq 0.7 \mu\text{mol/L}$ (WHO suggested cut off values for subclinical VAD) was 10.3%. Anthropometric indicators indicated a high proportion of the children had stunting and wasting or both. Analysis of dietary patterns, maternal literacy, food availability and other surrogate indicators indicated that the population is at mild-moderate risk of developing VAD.

In conclusion, no evidence of clinical vitamin A deficiency was found. Subclinical vitamin A deficiency seemed to occur in this population at a level of mild-moderate public health importance. Further studies need to be carried out to assess the situation in different areas in PNG before policy decisions can be made with regards to mass vitamin A supplementation.