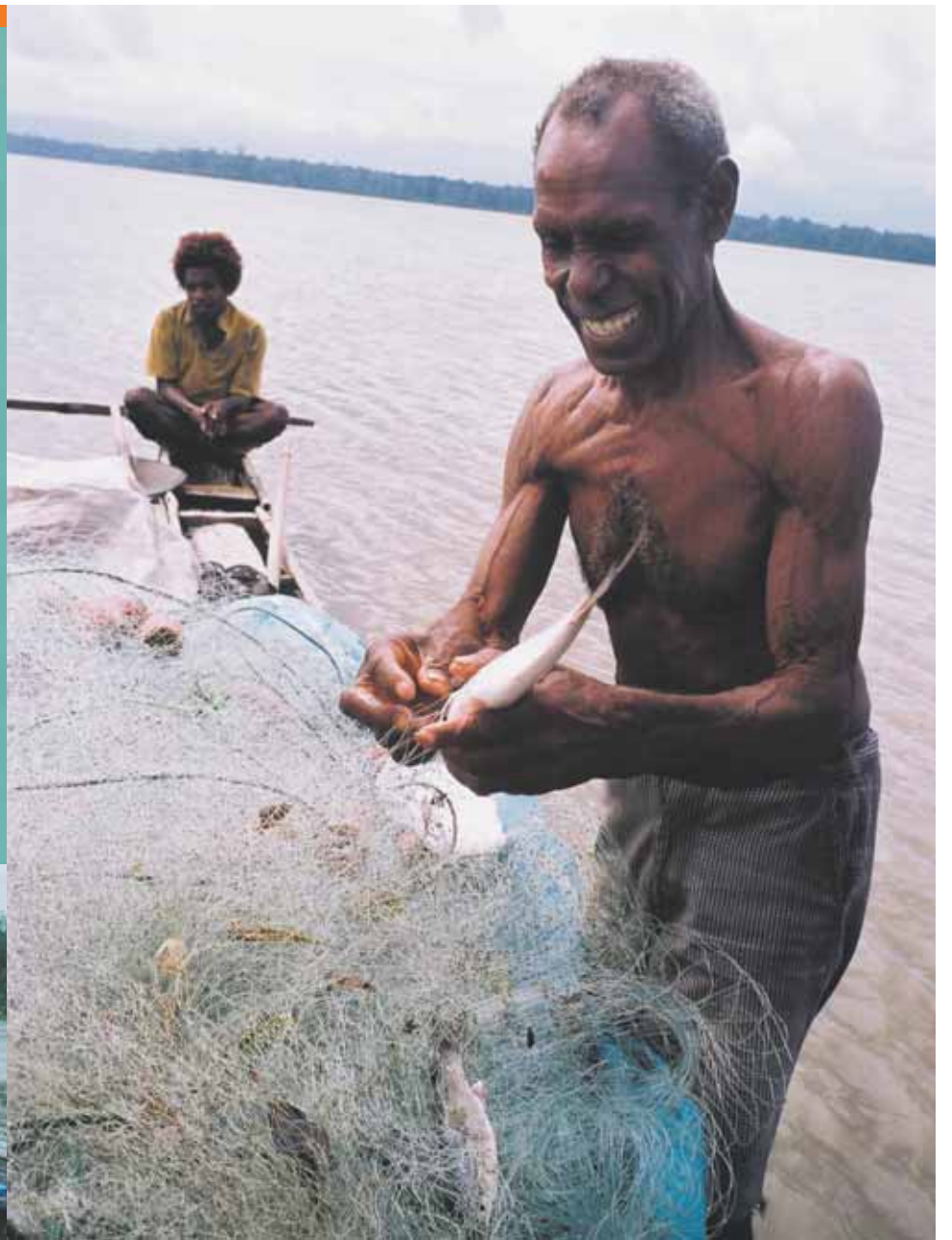


Fisherman sees again

Cataract surgery gives fishermen like Haraha the independence to keep going. Story and photos by Ben Bohane.



NORMAN TELA, a quietly spoken radio announcer with Gulf Radio, leans into his microphone and sends a “tok save” (public announcement) on health that goes out to listeners living in a vast green tangle of mountain, jungle, snaking rivers and swamp in the south west of Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Today Norman informs everyone that a team of eye doctors will be making a ten-day visit next week to Kerema’s small hospital to do surgery and provide glasses to those who can’t see properly or can’t see at all.

Meanwhile, at Port Moresby’s general hospital, Dr Jambi Garap assembles her team: nurse Molly Paul and Dr David Baru. Within a week they are on the ground in Kerema and there are plenty of patients waiting for them. It is the dry season now and the best time for the team to access some of the more remote communities. Some villagers have walked for days, others have paddled their dugout canoes down the myriad rivers that feed Gulf province, flooding it for nearly half the year during the wet season.

In Kerema, capital of Gulf province, not much has changed in recent decades. There has been no real development and people still live a largely subsistence lifestyle. Up river, on a little sandbank island known to locals as Fisherman’s Island, a wiry “lapun” (elderly man) named Haraha Lari returns from his day’s fishing. He

might be 67 years old but out here, far from government services or employment, you must fish to survive regardless of your age.

“LIFE IS HARD OUT HERE, IT IS ALWAYS A STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE,” HE SAYS, “BUT THIS IS MY HOME AND I ALWAYS TELL MY FAMILY THAT WE SHOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR WHAT WE HAVE.”

WHEN HE was in his fifties, Haraha started to lose sight in both eyes. As a fisherman, he was worried because it affected his ability to see the water ripples which signalled a school of mullet moving up river with the tide. “I was afraid it would stop me fishing and I didn’t want to be a burden on my family,” he says.

Then, in 2002, he heard on the radio that a team of doctors would be at his local hospital to check people’s eyes. Haraha paddled in and spent the day at Kerema hospital waiting his turn, not knowing what to expect from these doctors with strange equipment.

ON THE SAME DAY, ONE OF HARAHA’S EYES WAS OPERATED ON AND WITHIN 24 HOURS HE HAD SIGHT AGAIN IN ONE OF HIS EYES.

YEARS LATER, Haraha’s wife Wendy hears the radio “tok save” again and excitedly tells him that he has

a chance to get his other eye done. Having vision in both eyes greatly helps with boat navigation skills as it gives back three-dimensional vision.

Haraha puts on his best shirt and paddles with his two sons-in-law, Tau and Gary, toward Kerema. They climb up the muddy banks, laughing and singing as they slip and slide. The boys will sell some smoked fish at the market and pick up some veggies and other essentials while Haraha walks the remaining half kilometre to the hospital.

In the operating theatre, Dr Garap peers through the microscope, extracting the cataract (cloudy natural lens) on one of nearly a dozen patients she will operate on today. She will then replace the natural lens with a new plastic one, purchased from The Fred Hollows Foundation laboratory in Nepal. Molly makes sure all the surgical equipment is properly sterilised and Dr David is in another room doing “pre-op” tests on people’s eyes, testing their eyesight with vision charts on the wall.

For Haraha, the operation goes smoothly and he is soon paddling back to Fisherman’s Island. In only a few days he will be casting his nets again at dawn with the run-in tide.

“I didn’t expect to have this opportunity to see again,” he says with a big grin, “but with this blessing I’ll show those young fellas how to be a real fisherman!”