

Viseisei Sai Health Centres (VSHCs) Response to Cyclone Winston in collaboration with Sathya Sai Service Organisation of Fiji, Ministry of Health, Fiji National University Lautoka Hospital Campus and DISMAC

A category 5 severe TC, Winston, travelled through the Islands of Fiji on February 20th – 21st.



Map of Fiji showing path of TC Winston

We woke up on Saturday the 20th with warnings about a category 5 severe Tropical Cyclone Winston on its erratic path across Fiji. The day was used to bunker down with hurricane shutters to the Health Centre and to the house. Tying down roofs that looked vulnerable and getting rid of any loose debris that might cause havoc. Sukhu and Lachman helped Lucy, Swaran and Rajat do this work as the winds began to become more brisk in the early evening. By this stage the Hurricane was reaching Ra and the winds in Lautoka were becoming worrying. We sat in a bunkered up house until the storm had crossed our shores at about 10.30pm.

The radio broadcasts were of limited value but talked of disasters in Koro, Raki Raki, Tavua and Ba areas. We woke up on Sunday to a devastated vista, several plants had fallen, the road leading out of the house onto the main road was impassable with large fallen trees and the whole property looked devastated. Fortunately the Health Centre came out unscathed, as did the house. The next few days were taken up in making the Health Centre functional, and this had to be done without any electricity.



Viseisei Back Road impassable with fallen trees and branches blocking access to the Health Centre & house



Flooding at the Health Centre



Front of the Health Centre



Viseisei Back Road (beside the entrance to the house) covered in debris

Rajat and Swaran drove to Raki Raki on the 24th of February to get a firsthand idea of the destruction, visiting some family members on the way. What they saw was frightening and despairing. Almost half the houses beyond Ba seemed to be damaged and the situation looked worse as they approached Raki Raki. Large trees had been plucked out of the ground and hurled helter skelter with torn branches falling on roofs and destroying homes. Scarcely a family seemed unscathed. People were walking stunned into inaction trying to comprehend the devastation. It was obvious that there was going to be an enormous required effort to help people restart their lives. Responses seemed confused and we were advised to coordinate with the disaster management team in the District Commissioner's Office (DISMAC). In the mean time we tried to help family with emergency relief of tarpaulins, lighting and emergency food supplies.

Collaboration with DISMAC and the Ministry of Health

On Saturday the 27th, we met with the District Commissioner Western who was chairing the disaster management activities in the west. He identified Nanukuloa Health Centre, Navunibitu (Ra) Maternity Hospital and Waimaro Nursing Station as facilities where we should concentrate our activities. Lucy, Shane, Swaran, Rajat and Mosese went on Sunday the 28th to these facilities. We continued to see unbelievable sights of destruction as we approached Raki Raki. The Raki Raki Village seemed almost destroyed, with fewer than a quarter of the houses still standing. Beyond Raki Raki the devastation seemed worse as this was where the eye of Winston had gone through. Winston hovered in this area for almost two hours. Some coconut trees withstood the winds, but were now standing in submission with their leaves drooping. The previously tree covered hills, now stripped bare. Nanukuloa is an important historical village as this is where the administrative centre for Ra was housed in the early colonial days. People wishing to travel to Suva from the North, would catch the ferry from Nanukuloa. The Ra Provincial Council Administration still resides here. The Health Centre had two buildings, both affected and not functional. So we realised much would need to be done to return functionality to this facility.



Nanukuloa Village post TC Winston



Nanukuloa Health Centre

The Ra Maternity Hospital is about a five-minute drive from Nanukuloa Health Centre. This is located on a hill where the Roman Catholic Church had a Health Facility developed somewhere in the early 1900s. Two Nuns remain at this facility, which has been taken over by the Ministry of Health. The clinical building seemed undamaged, but the Nunnery and the Nurses Residence had both lost their roofs. The two Nuns recalled how they sheltered under their dining table watching the roof being blown away, and letting the bright moonlight through. The Nuns are both elderly and could still smile, but were distraught by having their two chapel bibles destroyed. They recalled that as the destruction occurred, their main concern was the safety of the “Tabernacle and the Blessed Sacrament”, and they managed to rescue it to safety.



A Nun from Ra Maternity hospital showing Rajat the dining table which they used for shelter



Damaged Nunnery (right) with Nurses quarters in the distance

We then went to Waimaro Nursing Station where the clinical building was completely destroyed and the Nurses Quarters had lost half its roof. In spite of this, Staff Nurse Asenaca was providing clinical services from what was left of the verandah. She recounted the horrible night when she cowered in the toilet with her family, as this tiny room was the strongest in the building.

The Viseisei team discussed with the District Medical Officer (DMO) Western about their response. This was to take the outreach VSHC mobile clinic bus on three days per week to provide clinical support. On Monday the team returned with staff from VSHC, the maternity unit at Lautoka Hospital and Trainee Interns from the Fiji National University (FNU). Their main task was to help staff nurse Leba at Nanukuloa clean her Health Centre and reorganise it back to some semblance of function. By the end of the day, the Health Centre was about 60% functional but 2 gaping holes in the roof remained the major concern should it rain. Fortunately the day was beautiful and no rain was forecast. The clinical cases managed on this day were few, but serious. There was a man with a nasty gash on his forearm sustained whilst clearing roofing iron from his destroyed roof. We were able to

suture the wound and save this man a trip to Raki Raki Hospital, which is about 30kms away. The second case was of a six year old boy with first and second degree burns due to a pot of hot dahl falling on him. The third case was one of suspected osteomyelitis in a young woman. The Health Centre did not have any tetanus toxoid or parental antibiotics.



Trainee Interns from FNU assisting with cleaning & reorganising Nanukuloa Health Centre



Staff from Lautoka Hospital, Trainee Interns and Viseisei Mobile Clinic Bus at Nanukuloa Health Centre

A VSHC lead team returned on Wednesday with a new batch of students who helped further restore the Nanukuloa Health Centre. They visited Waimaro where Staff Nurse Asenaca is concerned about 18 babies requiring immunisation. The team took some antibiotics and tetanus toxoid with them.



Tent set – up at Waimaro Nursing Station for use as a temporary clinic



Badly damaged Nurses Quarters at Waimaro Nursing Station

On each of these visits food parcels provided by the Sathya Sai Service organisation were handed out, but this was a difficult exercise as many families were receiving such items from numerous other agencies. Prior to distribution discussion took place with the distribution centre in Raki Raki to find out areas of need for the food parcels to be given to.



Family receiving food parcel in Raki Raki



Grateful recipient of food parcel in Raki Raki



Rajat and Shane delivering food parcels in Nanukuloa

On Thursday, the 3rd of March, Swaran, Mosese, Jenny and Solo from VSHC travelled to Tavua and Nadarivatu on a scouting and assessment mission. During this visit they visited the District Officer Tavua, Nadarivatu Health Centre, Nagatagata Nursing Station and Nadala Village. Similar destruction from TC Winston was observed as in Raki Raki. The schools have been badly damaged; however, the Health Centres received minor structural damage and are still operational. Power outages continue and limited aid has reached this area. Where ever they saw need they distributed grocery parcels.



VSHC staff with people from Nagatagata Village



Swaran delivering food parcel to a Villager from Nagatagata Village



Badly damaged houses in Nadala Village

VSHC is grateful to the Sathya Sai Service Organisation Fiji for providing food parcels for distribution and diesel for the clinic bus. The round trip is about 250kms, with a diesel fuel bill of about \$110 FJD per day. We are also grateful to the Fiji National University for allowing their students to join us and to the Maternity Unit staff at Lautoka Hospital. VSHC will continue supporting Nanukuloa, Ra Marternity and Waimarou during this critical time as they work towards returning to full functionality.

Our observation is that lack of electricity is a major factor in not being able to provide a full range of emergency health care services, as tetanus toxoid and vaccines require cool storage. The health facility infrastructure needs urgent repairs to ensure that the rains can be kept out, should the weather turn. The clinical staff at the three facilities require support to clean up, to reorganise their supplies and to restore their operations. Many of the staff bore the brunt of the eye of Winston which at its worst was blowing at over 350km/h. This has been the worst cyclone Fiji has experienced and these nurses and their families bore the brunt of the terror.

Wednesday's trip to Nanukuloa showed us some of the looming health challenges we saw our first patient with severe gastroenteritis and we saw an aid worker who had stepped on a nail. We are expecting diarrhoeal diseases for the young and old and trauma from rebuilding operations to become more prevalent. This recovery phase is likely to be prolonged and health staff throughout the system will require ongoing support for several months.

At VSHC lack of power has been a major issue; we have not been able to function adequately without outside links, telecommunication has been very limited with poor connectivity through Vodafone. We borrowed the use of the New Zealand Sai Organisations generator which was not able to provide adequate supply. Most power lines in the district remain dangling and it seems very unlikely that we will have power for several weeks. The trustees of VSHC made a decision to purchase a generator with enough capacity to provide electrification. This has led to an unexpected cost of over \$40,000, but the trustees feel that this would be a good investment in ensuring that VSHC can remain operational during times of power outages as this has a major effect on the whole local community. Since the generator has been installed last Monday, VSHC has been seeing over 100 patients a day. Many people these days are dependent on a charged mobile phone, and with no power available, this has compromised communication. The new generator will allow VSHC to become a communication hub in a time of crisis, so that people within Fiji can communicate and relatives from abroad can maintain contact with their loved ones here.