

---

## Interview

---

# 7. Jo Chandler: Gender, human rights and power investigations in Papua New Guinea

### ABSTRACT

A series of stories on the complexity and contradictions of Papua New Guinea, Australia's closest neighbour, has won the 2013 George Munster award for independent journalism. The award is presented by the George Munster Trust and the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at the University of Technology, Sydney. Freelance journalist and former senior writer for Fairfax Media, Jo Chandler won the award for her Papua New Guinea articles, published in 2013 in the now defunct online publication *The Global Mail*. Covering issues such as health and human rights; violence and justice; aid and development; gender and power, the stories illustrate the complexity and contradictions of PNG, Australia's closest neighbour. These stories included 'It's 2013, And They're Burning Witches', an article which received more than one million page views, and the personal 'TB and me'. Each story demonstrated strong investigative skills, rigorous fact checking and quality writing. At the award presentation on 17 March 2014 at UTS, Chandler took part in a conversation with ACIJ director associate professor Tom Morton about her stories, how and why she covered them and what continues to motivate her. The George Munster Award recognises excellence in journalism and commemorates George Munster, freelance editor, journalist and writer.

Keywords: development communication, gender, health journalism, human rights, investigative journalism, Papua New Guinea, sorcery

**I**N CONVERSATION between **Jo Chandler** and host associate professor **Tom Morton** at the George Munster Independent Journalism Award ceremony:

**TOM MORTON:** *I wanted to start off our conversation tonight, Jo, by asking you why did you want to do these stories on Papua New Guinea?*

**JO CHANDLER:** They actually emerged from the stories I did in Africa in a sense. I'd always wanted to do humanitarian reporting, I wanted to find opportunities to sort of dig into human stories and those sorts of spaces, and there was a woman at *The Age* when I was still fairly new there, a woman called Pamela Bone. She was a really interesting woman, very quiet, very self-possessed, very unassuming. She wrote a commentary that was often very feisty and very opinionated. She was then associate editor of the paper, the only woman that was. She had three daughters and wore skirts and sensible shoes and yet she would go off to Somalia or Darfur and Rwanda at the peak of the crisis there, and I would hear these stories sometimes come back from her escapades.

And there was this particular, terrific photographer Sandy Scheltema who travelled with Pam a couple of times to Africa and who told me of walking into this Rwandan jail which was absolutely full of Hutus and where she hid behind Pam, who just stood there and later wrote that she thought 'what is a grandmother from Balwyn [a Melbourne suburb] doing here?' And Pam told stories about crises in a really humane connected way as a woman and as a mother, and as a wife. I liked the fact that because of her status within the newsroom, she was able to fight for space to get those issues into the paper. I would sit in on conferences, in different roles that I had at that time and I would see Pam fight the fight to get these issues into the paper. Often they just weren't on the agenda for most of the people in the room, but because of the clout she had they got on the agenda, they got in the paper and she did the trips.

Pam actually got quite sick after she came back from one of her African trips and it later turned out that she had a form of blood cancer which ultimately killed her a couple of years ago. But by then I guess I'd asked her to pass the baton in a sense and I'd spoken to her many times about how she approached her stories and what she thought we would be doing. By then, as a former senior editor at different parts of the paper, I had not as much clout as Pam had but I had the space and the voice in the conference room and I felt like I should use it. I noticed since she had left the newsroom—you could see the stories weren't being represented in the same energetic and committed way.

I went to Africa a couple of times. I created opportunities to get there. The

first time I paid for it myself and persuaded the paper to give me insurance and that I'd go to Malawi and see what I could find out about an ongoing famine. And that was a great exercise in learning and in beginning to understand what you could and couldn't do and being very humbled by the experience of finding yourself in some god-forsaken place with people who are incredibly distressed—women holding babies that they can't save, and you're standing there with a notebook and pen thinking 'so what exactly did I think I would do for these people? And why did I think this would be useful?' Not knowing how to speak to them—I mean, 'how do you feel about your baby dying?'

These are not questions that you want to ask. So I tried to channel Pam—I asked about how many children people had, what hopes they had for them, where the food was coming from, where it wasn't coming from. We tried to piece together lives.

I'd managed a couple of trips, not so many, really. A lot of the time you're not in that space, but you're reading and involved and trying to learn something of the landscape before you get there. And you become really engaged. But after coming back from Africa, I kept writing stories about humanitarian issues, and women's issues and gender. I was really interested in maternal mortality. I think it was entirely selfish—I had had a really bad birth and I kept thinking, 'how do women cope without all the things that stepped in to save me?' I was kind of traumatised and guilty about that and so it became a bit of a driving force.

By then newspaper budgets were fading away, rapidly. We were shutting down international bureaus, we were closing off contracts to stringers, we weren't getting anywhere near the volume of material coming in from overseas. The prospects of ever becoming a foreign correspondent, that were always pretty dim, were fading rapidly. And so if you wanted to imagine yourself telling those sorts of stories you had to create the opportunities yourself.

I started to wonder, looking at all these [humanitarian and development] reports I was looking at—why was I going to Africa looking for stories when Papua New Guinea had perhaps, some of the worst maternal death figures after Niger and Afghanistan. There was a report that came out [around 2008] that said the maternal death rates in PNG had doubled in the last 10 years and were now 733 per 100,000 births. To give a perspective, in Australia, that figure for white Australians is eight and for Indigenous Australians it is 21. And I couldn't figure out how we were spending \$400 million a year on health aid

in Papua New Guinea and yet the death rate for women is terrible there. It's bleeding to death essentially, because of a lack of assistance.

So I took that story to an editor who looked and nodded and said, 'yeah that looks really important, but you can't possibly go there and do just that story'. So then I realised this kind of expedition approach I had trialled in Africa is perhaps the best way. It was really a consequence of having been an editor, I understood how the budget system worked. I understood that while no particular person might have a budget to say yes to a big story, that if I could look under the rocks of the various departments and I could cobble something together. If I promised one story to *Business*, one story to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, one to *Good Weekend*, one to the *Insight* section, and they all pitched in, we might just get there.

And so that's what I started to do. For Papua New Guinea that first trip I wanted to go for the maternal stories. The long answer to the question you started with is that—it was the figure, that maternal death figure, that drove it. I thought, 'well, what's going to get me over the line, to get me to Papua New Guinea? And at that point this massive project, the LNG PNG gas project, was under development. It was all over the pages of the *Financial Review*, the *SMH* and *The Age* but nowhere did you ever see anything about the social impacts. Everyone talked about it as a game-changer for PNG; it was going to double GDP, but what was it? And what did it mean on the ground for the communities that were there?

So I sold that idea to the *Business* section, *Insight* and *News Review*. I sold story ideas about violence, and one of them was about Médecins Sans Frontières which had decided to dispatch a team into a hospital in Tari in the Highlands which happened to be right in the heartland of the LNG country because Oxfam had done a survey in there which found the levels of violence being attended to on a daily basis were equivalent to a war zone. And you never saw this reported anywhere. It was on those grounds that MSF went into this location and set up a surgical hospital, and it does indeed look like a war zone in Tari. Every day people come in with machete wounds, mostly inflicted by their nearest and dearest.

So yes, that was the approach initially—I'm going to go in for three weeks, we're going to try and research four, or five, or six stories. We'll hope that planes land and take off at the right time and vehicles don't break down and we don't get hijacked and we'll see how far we get. And we came back after

that time with five stories. But by then I realised how interconnected all those narratives were and I became a little bit obsessed.

**TOM MORTON:** *I think it's very, very interesting though what you've said about the way that stories get onto, what you might call, the mainstream news agenda because of that example that you talked about, it happens all the time. There are stories in the Business pages which somehow never get picked up by reporters in daily news rounds, we see it all the time in Australia: Huge stories in the Business pages that usually only make it onto the news pages if they involve ICAC (Independent Commission Against Corruption) or something similar. But that's a great illustration, I think, of how, in a way, you've got to be prepared to think outside of the mainstream news agenda to find the stories and then to find a way to get them onto those, to fit them into the news agenda.*

**JO CHANDLER:** I think it was. Looking back now, it was learning from the eight years as an editor and sitting in on news conferences and hearing how ideas are floated, developed, championed and pushed into some part or other of the paper. And all the office politics around that. And also what's required in the end, to get from the dream and the half-arsed idea to really do the hard work and the research to know, before you get on the plane, or get in the car, that there's a reasonable chance that the story you're chasing actually exists. And that it's roughly the kind of dynamics that you think exist.

So, that editing experience was very informative about the tricks of getting stories up, identifying where to find the budget and thinking where the sympathies and interests of these editors would be. It's quite a cunning kind of operation, which is the difficulty now of freelancing, because you're going in cold every time.

One of the main reasons I was able to do a lot of stories in *The Age* in the last two years or so was that the deputy editor at the time, Mark Baker, was a former correspondent in Papua New Guinea in the days when Fairfax had a full time correspondent there. So he automatically had an interest and recognition of the stories. Had he not been there, I probably wouldn't have been able to get them up.

And it's also about learning to persuade an editor that in fact they'd thought of the stories, because it's really important that somebody's neck will be on

the line if it doesn't come through and not yours—if it's just yours, nobody cares. But to have some editor who's championing it because they've gone to bat for it in conferences half a dozen times, they've talked up how important and how great it is, and they have invested in it.

So you need to ride on that. It may seem so silly that the internal dynamics are such a big player. But certainly in an organisation like Fairfax it was important to know not just your wider readership audience but how you're going to work the system to achieve the results that you want to achieve.

**TOM MORTON:** *Well, all of our students who are in the audience tonight heard some very, very useful tricks-of-the-trade advice from Jo, so I hope you're taking note. So, Jo, let's talk a little bit about the stories themselves. The story about witches, a story that as I said before got a million page views around the world—first of all, how did you become aware of that story, had you done a lot of research before you went to Papua New Guinea for this trip?*

**JO CHANDLER:** Like so many of these things, it's a layering of learning. One of the stories I did on the first trip, was a *Good Weekend* story, a profile of an amazing woman called Dame Carol Kidu who looks like your regular Queensland Nana except for the tribal tattoos that she's got on her arms. She married a Papua New Guinean man back in the 1970s who went on to become the Chief Justice of Papua New Guinea. He died fairly young but she entered politics, and has stayed on. She was for a long time the only woman in the PNG Parliament and she was preparing to retire. She was trying to set up almost like a quota system that would give 22 seats to women in the next Parliament, because she was so concerned that there wouldn't be one.

**TOM MORTON:** *So it was like a shockingly radical kind of an issue?*

**JO CHANDLER:** I know. But few people appreciate that female representation in the Pacific is the worst, is the lowest in the world—it's lower than in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia—you know, there's just an incredibly diminished number—well, not diminished—they've never been there. So I proposed a story about Carol to *Good Weekend*. To write a story about her efforts to get women in Parliament meant me tracking back women's status in society. And violence is such a big issue. So it was in researching Carol's story and the dynamics behind the lack of women's representation that I



© VLAD SOKHIN

**Figure 1: Rasta was accused of sorcery by people in her village after the death of a young man in 2003. She was set upon by a crowd at his funeral, beaten and strangled until she escaped. She lost her hand in the attack. A photograph reproduced with Jo Chandler's witches article in *The Global Mail*.**

began to get to sense the huge amount of violence against women in Papua New Guinea because there's not a lot of data. There's very few studies and the ones that exist are pretty bad. I think something like two out of three women, wives or married women, say they've been beaten by their partners or by other people in the household—50 percent of women have reported sexual violence against them, huge numbers.

Even to sit outside Tari Hospital for a morning and watch them come in—you know, it's all the knife wounds here [Jo points to her forearm] from holding them up. The bush knives—they're so big. There was one woman chopped right through the back of her neck—it was virtually hanging off. Legs taken off, things stuck into their genitalia, and there would be 30 of those cases sitting in at the hospital—often with the bloke who'd done the damage the night before sitting there nonchalantly next to them. So I began getting interested in the dynamics of the violence: where did it come from, how much of it could you find an explanation for in local culture, how much of it was a

result of rapid social change, was it always there, has it gotten worse? And I guess Carol was my gateway or my beginning to getting those conversations with lots of Papua New Guinean women.

It was then that I began to hear the story of sorcery-related violence but I was really reluctant to do the story because I was worried—and Carol had the same issue, when she went to the United Nations to report on women's issues in PNG. There had been a lot of discussion about whether or not to highlight the sorcery related violence issues because the issue was so bizarre that it would hijack the agenda. I was worried that if I used the witches' story, was I just distorting a small part of the story because of its kind of sensational value, and therefore compromising the bigger, broader story about domestic violence as it is in PNG?

Eventually, after speaking to lots of people, I was persuaded that it was a legitimate, big, growing issue, and I was partly persuaded by an extraordinary Polish man—an orthopaedic surgeon and Catholic priest who works in Kundiawa, in the Highlands. I got to know Father Jan quite well. I'd met him in Melbourne. I'd met him in PNG and he invited me up to Kundiawa, to stay at the accommodation he had at the hospital there, and poke around the issue.

By then I had heard about these human rights defender networks which were like an underground railroad, trying to get women who were being targeted as sorcerers out of their communities. And they struck me as incredibly brave networks because these are people with no resources whatsoever, and very exposed in their communities, but I thought they were extraordinary stories. So I had them on my wish list for a long time. And various editors were interested at Fairfax but not enough to send me there.

So when I left *The Age*, it was at the top of my list. Basically I had three or four stories that I wanted to pursue as an expedition, in this model I had used before. Once I could sign on three or four different publications that would take them I'd go and see how they went. So it was really, maybe two or three years I sat on that story, in a sense of researching it when I had time, trying to figure out who to talk to, was it real, where did it exist, how could I approach it in a responsible way.

In the end it all came together when I went to Kundiawa. I went to see Father Jan and he said to me, 'I've just discharged a woman from the hospital who had terrible injuries'. He said, 'did you want to see some photographs of her?'



I assumed he had taken pictures in the hospital. And then on the laptop these amazing photos came up of her being tortured. They'd been taken by someone at the scene of the torture. She was strung up naked and being burned and branded—there were a dozen of these pictures there. So I began to think about how would be an appropriate way to use them. What had happened to her? Could I track her down? In the end I couldn't, she was hidden away elsewhere. How could I use that story, Lauren (my editor at *The Global Mail*) and I had many discussions about how to use the pictures, about whether they were exploitative.

What if they just got picked up and went without context around the world? What if she (the victim) saw them? I was really concerned that she survived this terrible violence and attack, only to be confronted by images of herself all over the internet in the most vulnerable condition. So we had a lot of thinking about how to manage that. In the end I guess managed it the best we could with 5000 words of context built around it, but as I said, it was probably three or so years to get to that point.

**TOM MORTON:** *I think it's important to point out too that those pictures were taken at what was effectively a public event. [JO CHANDLER nods] Where this woman was being tortured in front of an audience, so could you talk a little bit about that, just perhaps about how you did resolve some of those ethical issues about how to use them?*

**JO CHANDLER:** One of our concerns was you could see uniformed police standing, watching the torture in several of the frames. And I was quite concerned that one of them may well have become upset about their image being used or included in this photograph and that might have persuaded them to go after this woman again.

**TOM MORTON:** *I mean that's a shocking thing in itself. Police were standing by and watching—while this woman was being tortured.*

**JO CHANDLER:** And actually a few months later I had a long interview with the PNG Minister for Justice and I was with the photographer I worked with a lot, Vlad Sokhin, a Russian photographer (2014). He showed these pictures to the minister on his laptop and asked him about them. The minister was appalled, I think, when he saw these images—really shocked. We said to

him, ‘what about these police?’ And he actually wanted to take the pictures to the Police Minister who was at the same conference and have them go after these guys.

We said to him, ‘why have these police done nothing [to protect the victim]? And part of it—I sort of knew the answer by then—was the police in these communities are largely unsupported as well as often largely untrained. They will be as captive to the local politics and beliefs as anyone.

They may well believe that the woman is a witch and brought about the death of the two young men she was accused of killing. And also there were four or five police, and in those pictures—there are probably 200, 300 or 400 people standing there.

The nun, the elderly Swiss nun who attempted to stop the torture of the woman, was herself set upon by the ‘marijuana boys’ as she called them. I was told by others that her life was in danger because she spoke up and told them to stop what they were doing. I think the police were also frightened. And there is genuine belief in sorcery, even among well educated, very respectable Papua New Guineans. They don’t necessarily all subscribe to violence as part of that belief system—they’re the extremists, I guess. But in the context of a small village in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, if you’re one of the local coppers, you feel you’re as vulnerable as anyone to retribution if you step into the wrong person’s fight. So that’s part of it.

**TOM MORTON:** *I think one of the most interesting and in some ways chilling aspects of the—as you said—5000 words of context that you put around this story, is that I can remember when I did first year anthropology having a lecture and a seminar on the practice of sorcery in Papua New Guinea Highlands. But you know, the view for a long time was that these beliefs and practices would begin to disappear, fade away with the advent of modernity, modern communications. But actually the opposite is happening.*

**JO CHANDLER:** So it appears, it’s really hard to get good data. But talking to anthropologists who work in Papua New Guinea, community leaders, church leaders, who deal with it a lot, people who have been there a long time, they say that there were particular neighbourhoods, or particular cultures, that were notorious for that kind of level of violence—that they practice particular kinds of sorcery. But they were quite rare and spread out. Papua New Guinea is an amazing, fabulous diverse place. You’ve got more



© VLAD SOKHIN

**Figure 2: These men call their gang ‘Dirty Dons 585’ and admit to rapes and armed robberies in the Port Moresby area. They say two-thirds of their victims are women.**

than 800 cultures there, 800 languages, you know one valley could have a completely different set of beliefs to the one over the hill, so what was strange was that that really kind of virulent, nasty, strong cultures of punishment were breaking out in places where those cultures had never existed before.

There was talk that there were almost vigilante squads or groups for hire that would do the torture for you in return for drugs or guns or cash. And that was also unheard of because, historically, the person wanting retribution on the sorcerer would be from the family that perceives that sorcerer to have done something—so it’s about family honour or family defence and you don’t out-source that kind of thing. There were stories, about what was occurring—that the same gangs who were doing attacks in Mendi and then showing up further down the road—which was odd. The marijuana and booze—that hadn’t been part of the spectacle before, and in fact most of the specialists said in the old days, they threw you off a cliff or, you know, chopped your head off somewhere in the bush where no one had any idea about it, it wasn’t this village kind of ...

**TOM MORTON:** *Public spectacle?*

**JO CHANDLER:** ... Yeah, it is a public spectacle. And you can see in some villages—at night there's no power but someone might have a generator going and they'll be showing some incredibly violent film to everyone in the village, old and young sitting there watching that, and you have to wonder about that sort of culture creeping in is, well, distorting local culture. So you've got all these changes occurring and certainly from the number of reports coming to police, whether it's now more people reporting or not, it is hard to say.

But certainly there appears to be a growing problem in parts of the country, and driven in part by the social dislocation and disenfranchisement of young people with a certain amount of education but no prospect of engagement in jobs or getting out and many of them using drugs and alcohol as steam.

**TOM MORTON:** *Steam?*

**JO CHANDLER:** Oh, it's a home brew, potent, 'jungle juice'.

**TOM MORTON:** *One of the interesting things about your story too is that it then had a huge response internationally, a million page views, but it also generated a pretty intense debate in Papua New Guinea itself.*

**JO CHANDLER:** Because at the same time I was just finishing the research on this, there was a terrible event where a woman who had a child in hospital in Mount Hagen—she had a six-year-old boy in hospital, he had been sick. He got better. The boy in the next bed died. And the family of the boy in the next bed decided she had put bad *juju* or *sanguma*, on their son—that she was responsible for his death. So various relatives of the dead boy rounded her up and took her to the local tip. I think she was 21, 22 years old. Her husband shot through when he realised what was happening. She had two children. They basically tied her up on a stake at the rubbish dump and they doused her with petrol, stripped her, tortured her, burnt her, and set her alight. And hundreds of people watched this and took pictures on their phones.

Police again stood back and let it happen. And these pictures were run on the front pages of the two national newspapers, *PNG Post-Courier* and *The*

*National*, the next day—camera phone pictures. Papua New Guineans were horrified, absolutely appalled that this had happened. And everyone had heard these sorts of stories before but now the cameras, the photographs had shown how appalling it was and had shown that children were watching when this happened and so a big debate started.

The pictures circulated really widely on social media. Facebook is huge in Papua New Guinea now and growing, and there was a lot of discussion then amongst people. If they believed in sorcery, how should it be expressed? What's appropriate, and what's inappropriate? It really fed into a lot of internal debates that have been occurring in PNG lately.

I think that's one of the things you lose if you don't have the context is that local people are as appalled as everybody else as to what has occurred here. You know you are talking about a minority behaviour and there's a huge willingness in Papua New Guinea to try and find ways to tackle that.

**TOM MORTON:** *And what sort of ways are people talking about in trying to tackle it?*

**JO CHANDLER:** A lot talk about education, better education. A lot of them rely on church structures. There was an interesting piece of feedback that we had from the story that we ran because I used church voices and I referred several times to the Catholic church, particularly its efforts to step in and stop these spectacles.

**TOM MORTON:** *That's a good news story about the Catholic Church.*

**JO CHANDLER:** Well it is—there are a lot of honourable people up there doing some incredible things. Wendy Harmer and I were going to start a little society supporting the good priests. It was interesting—in a lot of the feedback to the story, people said, 'Well, you know, how appalling is this? You're just using the church to defend people against crazy belief systems and it's time the church backed out'. But the fact is in most of rural PNG there is no functional state. And you know, there's no functional police force, there are no services, and so it's really the church that provides a hub, and a resource, and a defence system, and a morality in a lot of these communities. There's also a fracturing of that. The Catholics once had a big franchise there and

probably had 80 to 90 percent of the action for a long time; there's now a lot of more fringe ...

**TOM MORTON:** *Pentecostal churches?*

**JO CHANDLER:** ... Pentecostals, yeah. And in fact what they're talking about feeds in and stirs up the sorcery and the black magic because it kind of all fits together. So the Catholics are sitting there saying, 'whatever you do, don't go over to that church there to that guy talking about the devil inside because they're feeding these belief systems'. So you've got a religious cultural battle here for souls.

Certainly some of the (protective) models I saw working—especially in the Highlands—are being very effective. Some were initiated by this Father Jan. He basically has spies—in communities—who he's trained up. When someone dies and the rumour starts getting around (accusing someone of sorcery), they will interfere and try and change the subject: 'great weather we're having', 'how's your coffee plantation', whatever. If that doesn't work, then they'll run for help and they'll have these sort of intervention squads. Often it's Father Jan himself who will step in.

He told me this great story once about how they were about to lynch somebody for a death of a very significant local politician. He heard that they had found the sorcerer and they were going to string her up and so he walked into this particular frenzy that was beginning to build up about burning the witch and he said, 'this woman did not kill that man, he died because he was very, very fat'. He went on to explain how the dead man was sick and he was overweight. This went to the core of the issue, because the reason they go around looking for sorcerers is that there's otherwise no rationale for natural death. You have to bring in ideas of illness, and accident, because that's not culturally part of why somebody dies, there's a belief that nobody dies without somebody wishing it upon them. Maybe if they're very old, but if you're young, healthy, powerful, someone must have done it and someone must be held accountable. So even to begin to talk to your community about ill health, and medical forms and disease, about things that will kill you, will begin to change belief systems.

**TOM MORTON:** *You did five stories and it would be great to talk about all*

*of them, but I'm conscious of the fact that we wanted to have some questions from the audience, and also that we need to spare your voice.*

**JO CHANDLER:** And I know I'm talking a lot!

**TOM MORTON:** *No it's good, it's fantastic. But before we go to questions, I would just like to ask you a little bit about, well one of the reasons we have to spare your voice—now the phrase you used that I'm going to ask you about in a moment—ah yes—'accidental immersion journalism'. Tell us a bit about accidental immersion journalism and the consequences for you.*

**JO CHANDLER:** One of the stories on my list that I was pursuing—I think in my second big trip I did to Papua New Guinea with Jason South—was about the multi-drug resistant tuberculosis crisis that was shaping up, particularly in Western Province and along the coast of Torres Strait.

There had been isolated stories on the ABC about it, and in the *Cairns Post* there were a couple of stories and I had started hearing from some specialists in Cairns that they were very worried about what was occurring. Queensland Health was shutting down a couple of TB clinics that had long been providing a service in Torres Strait. There was a lot of debate about whether or not that was a good thing to do but it kind of triggered an opportunity to look at this story. We got to Daru which is sort of the wild town that's probably closest to where the Australian Cape York points up. I had heard the hospital was basically not functioning and it was every bit as bad as the reports had said. I think ... I had better not say if this is being recorded. But anyway, the executive of the hospital had gone under mysterious circumstances, the doctors were nowhere to be seen, every piece of equipment in the hospital was broken, it was incredibly overcrowded, they'd just had a massive cholera epidemic, hundreds of people had died and the tents were still outside where MSF and World Vision and others had come in to mop up the mess of the cholera and then had left again.

But it was an appalling situation and the Australian government was quite embarrassed that it had got to the point that it had. There was a mad effort to try and rehabilitate the place. We had, I think, a couple of days visiting the hospital. We walked in and out of the wards as much as we wanted for a day or two, we visited the morgue, we talked to families, we went out into the

settlements, out on the mud flats where people were living 30-40 in a house, in often really quite appalling conditions.

Just towards the end of it, when we thought we really wanted to get out of town, I remember feeling a little bit seedy and I said to Jason, the photographer, ‘whatever happens, do not put me in that hospital ...drag me onto the plane, anything, but I feel funny in my chest’.

I actually went to hospital not long after I got home with a mysterious set of symptoms, and they kind of all resolved, and it was all a bit of a mystery and I didn’t think about it again until this time last year.

I had a terrible cough. I’d just done a lecture to a group of Monash students and I coughed the whole way through and I went to climb a set of stairs and I couldn’t, I was sucking in breath and thought ‘that’s not good’. I went to have an X-Ray and basically from there, I got shuttled into this weird system where they put highly infectious, dodgy characters. It took two or three weeks and some surgery to figure out what it was, and it was MDR TB, multi-drug resistant tuberculosis, that I must have picked up in Daru. Highly unusual, lots of doctors and nurses can work for years with TB patients, coughing all over them, and not get sick but you know, as one of my specialists said I ‘won Tattslotto’.

It was very interesting because I’d done stories in Mozambique and in the Congo, I’d been in and out of TB hospitals for years. I remembered the first time I went into one in Mozambique and said, ‘should I be wearing a mask?’ They said, ‘no, you’ll be fine, don’t worry about it’.

So I knew that people died of TB, I knew that the new virulent strains—one of which it turned out I had—were really nasty. But I also knew that I had access to incredible doctors and specialists, drugs and medicines and I would in all likelihood be completely fine, which I am and I was. But it was very humbling to know how I had access to all that I had needed. I think one of my specialists said that my treatment, by the time that I’m finished would be worth around the \$250,000 mark—thank you very much to all of you who pay your taxes.

But in Papua New Guinea, I think the figure that’s quoted the most allocates 30 kina a person per year by the PNG Health Department, which is \$15. So how on earth do you manage a crisis of the proportions of the TB emergency? It’s not just that it’s a health crisis in itself and the terrible effects it has on family and that it still kills people—it also hijacks the rest of the health system from



people with other stuff because every bed is occupied by people with TB. All the doctors' time and all the health resources get used up for TB. Which is another reason why women die in childbirth out in the bush because they can't access the health care because TB is sucking all the resources.

So I figured—do some advocacy, patient advocacy. One of my doctors said, 'you can make TB sexy' and I thought, 'well if that's what I have got to do, that's what I'll do'. So I figured I'd start talking about it. For a lot of people it's taboo and so being able to talk and say it's curable, it's treatable, it's manageable, it's all a matter of resources and it doesn't have to cost as much as it does.

One of the problems has been the lack of investment in vaccines, medicines for so long because wealthy countries no longer regard it as a problem. It's really hard to attract investment in new vaccines, they're still really using vaccines, treatment drugs and even sputum tests diagnosis that are 50, 70, 100 years old. One of the biggest problems in PNG is just that recognising who's got MDR TB, because the sputum system is all that they've got at the moment, which doesn't tell you about drug resistant versions of the bug, so they can be cloaked for a long time and spread enormously.

**TOM MORTON:** *Yeah because one of the ironies of course is I mean TB was widespread in the 19th Century, it was a disease of romantic poets and millions and millions of poor people. In Australia it survives largely in Aboriginal communities, and again, very poor and marginalised people.*

**JO CHANDLER:** I kept thinking when I got sick ... probably about the same time that I picked up the bug and breathed this thing in—is it was certainly on that trip to Daru. Jason had been looking for pictures around the hospital and he came back and said, 'you need to come to the morgue, this woman has just died and her mother's wrapping her up'. So we went and spoke to the mother, and her 19-year-old daughter had had a horrible, agonising death and it was kind of still written on her. And her little brother was outside this room and he was just screaming the most awful keening grief and the mother was incredibly quiet.

But we rode back with the brother, the mother, the father, in the back of this ambulance to the community to talk to them because we'd heard that the whole family had TB. And this woman held my hand in the back, this mother

## INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TRENDS

... and we spoke a little, but not much. She just held hands with me, which is what Papua New Guineans do, they just reach out all the time. They're very tactile in a lot of communities. But when I got sick I kept thinking of her and her daughter. Despite talking here tonight I actually don't like talking about myself—but I figured that, well, I ended up doing quite a bit of talking about TB and doing some advocacy. I thought it's the least I can do if the story is going to go anywhere.

### References

- Chandler, J. (2013). Project PNG. *The Global Post*. Retrieved on April 7, 2014, from [www.theglobalmail.org/features/in/project-png/](http://www.theglobalmail.org/features/in/project-png/)
- Chandler, J. (2013, June 12). Plagued: TB and me. *The Global Post*. Retrieved on April 7, 2014, from [www.theglobalmail.org/feature/plagued-tb-and-me/639/](http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/plagued-tb-and-me/639/)
- Chandler, J. (2013, February 15). It's 2013, and they're burning witches. *The Global Post*. Retrieved on April 7, 2014, from [www.theglobalmail.org/feature/its-2013-and-theyre-burning-witches/558/](http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/its-2013-and-theyre-burning-witches/558/)
- Sokhin, V. (2014). Vlad Sokhin: Photographer. Available at: [www.vladsokhin.com/home](http://www.vladsokhin.com/home)

## Does your work deserve a Munster?

The **Australian Centre for Independent Journalism** will be calling for entries later this year for the annual George Munster Award for Independent Journalism.

Recognising independence and excellence, the work needs to have been published or broadcast in Australia in the twelve months prior to 30 June 2014.

More information? [www.acij.uts.edu.au](http://www.acij.uts.edu.au)

