

Student baptism of fire:

Reporting the kerosene lamp blasts

Student journalists have learned lessons from a spate of deadly kerosene lamp explosions in Madang, Papua New Guinea. The blasts, which killed four people and injured 43 others, provided the students with an unprecedented opportunity to hone newsgathering and writing skills.

By JOE WEBER

A SPATE of kerosene lamp explosions, which killed four people and injured 43 others, has provided Papua New Guinean journalism students with an unprecedented opportunity to hone newsgathering and story writing skills.

Kerosene contaminated with petrol caused dozens of explosions in remote villages on the north coast of Papua New Guinea in February 2001 and the plight of the victims could easily have been overlooked. The country's media organisations, based in Port Moresby, hundreds of kilometres away from the inaccessible villages, faced difficulties in reporting the story as local disaster relief officials were reluctant to give information to reporters.

However, journalism students at Divine Word University, Madang, were able to talk to the victims and the story of the tragedy was catapulted onto the front pages of the country's newspapers with a series of detailed reports.

The Australian media followed in the footsteps of the local media using the students reports and photographs and the story of the explosions was also broadcast on radio and television. As media interest increased, BP, which had sold all the contaminated fuel, arranged for seven of the most severely injured patients to be medivaced to Brisbane, Australia, for specialist treatment.

Students in the university's Communication Arts Department were rightly proud of their achievements in helping people who could easily have been overlooked and forgotten.

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But if the articles merely produced an impressive addition to their personal portfolios of published stories or an interesting display on the walls of departmental offices then the exercise has been of little lasting value. Much more important are the lessons that can be learnt from this situation. And there are lessons here for the students and the departments' journalism educators.

The story broke, on February 12, because a group of journalism students were out gathering information and talking to people. The lesson they learnt is that real news is found by reporters going out and talking to people rather than sitting in an office or classroom and waiting for it to come to them.

Five students had spent an afternoon talking to health officials, aid post workers, teachers and villagers about projects aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles within villages and a school. Hot and weary, the students had completed their assignment by late afternoon, and were stood around sipping canned drinks and chatting idly on a street corner in the centre of Madang.

The first of the explosions were casually mentioned in the course of a conversation. I hope the students learnt that news breaks at unexpected times and reporters have to work, even when tired and hungry.

Notebooks were hurriedly pulled from pockets as the casual chatter was replaced with questions seeking hard facts. Few were available. Fourteen people were known to have been injured and several houses damaged in a series of unexplained explosions in five villages. All the explosions had occurred when people tried to light kerosene lamps.

John Levi, chief executive officer of Modilon Hospital, was interviewed and confirmed that more than a dozen people had been treated for their injuries. Students returned to the campus and wrote the first of a series of stories, but the lack of details and the fact that the copy was completed late in the evening meant it was doomed to be no more than a couple of paragraphs on an inside page of the next day's paper.

The next day the students put their news gathering skills into practice. One of the villages where an explosion had taken place was Bilbil, just a few kilometres from Madang. A group of students travelled there to find the charred remains of six houses which had been destroyed in a blaze started by an exploding kerosene lamp. Children were scouring the ashes for nails and villagers recounted what had happened.

The story was simple. Elizabeth Bogeia had been trying to light a lamp when it exploded in her face. Luckily she threw the burning lamp down and escaped unhurt although the fire rapidly swept through houses.

Kerosene victims look to the future after birth of baby

By Peter Walker

After a spate of kerosene lamp explosions two months ago, which killed three children and a 14-year-old woman, as well as injuring 43 others, a girl was born to one of the victims.



Maria (right) and her son Anthony look newly-born Shana.

The explosion occurred in a village in the mountains of Sumatra, Indonesia. The victims were from the village of...

Kerosene is widely used as a primary source of the fuel.

Maria suffered severe burns to her chest and, because she was seven months pregnant at the time of the blast, she was hospitalized in Brisbane to check on the good health of her unborn child.

Anthony suffered third degree burns to his face and his legs when the lamp he was lighting in his house suddenly exploded.

He heated the lamp from the house but accidentally used the lighting fluid inside the lamp.

Anthony was brought to hospital as a VIP because of his status as a Malaysian soldier that day.

Maria was in Brisbane for two weeks while Anthony was there for six weeks.

The couple are now back at Maridion hospital and grateful for the care and treatment they were given.

Maria said "I am very happy to see the new baby she is healthy. There are 10 kerosene lamps in my house and I am glad they are not lit."

Anthony is now back at Maridion hospital and grateful for the care and treatment they were given.

He said "I am very happy with the doctors and nurses, particularly in Brisbane."

They were well looked after. The nurses and doctors washed and gave us good food and drinks, provided good beds, we had a TV and radio in our wards and they provided constant medical checks. I am happy that we were here in Australia."

Beky Shana is the fifth child born to the Tarnish family and they are hoping that they will be encouraged to be hungarians work and are looking forward to returning home.

Anthony is currently in the Royal Children's Hospital in East Sepik. They are still in hospital at Maridion, near Madang, the capital of the province.

Once they return to the village, doctors have advised them to avoid physical work for the next two years. This will allow time for their bodies to fully recover from their injuries.

Maria and Anthony are now appearing in a film to assist with their family needs.

Anthony said "We have a family of support by the army and advised us to go to Maridion hospital. The hospital was very good and we were very happy."

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An after-math story about the kerosene lamp tragedy in *Liklik Diwai*, the students' weekly newsletter, 6 April 2001.

"The nurse asked us, if the baby was a girl, that she be named after her"



Maria (right) and her son Anthony look newly-born Shana.

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She picked up the remains of the lamp and displayed it to the students for a photograph as she explained her family had lost all their possessions in the fire. Students recorded interviews on minidisc recorders, in notebooks and took photographs, while the driver of the university minibus quietly helped organise practical assistance and promised to send clothes to people who had lost everything.

Next stop was Modilon Hospital, where more injured had been arriving throughout the day. Doctors and nurses were busy treating the patients but the injured told the students how they had suffered their injuries.

It was the same story time and time again. They had been attempting to light a kerosene lamp when it exploded into flames. The injured were in a crowded surgical ward, bandaged and with antibiotic creams on their burns. Their injuries were terrible and the sounds of children screaming dominated the ward.

The intensive care unit was much quieter and here three patients softly told an almost

identical story of how they were injured. In the casualty ward more patients were arriving as they were brought in from remote villages.

Students returned to the university and settled down to write the story of the growing number of victims. The next day the national papers contained their photographs and stories and the full horror of the incident became apparent to the nation.

They discovered the explosions occurred when villagers tried to light appliances fuelled by contaminated kerosene which had been bought at BP service stations in Madang and Sagalau.

The next few days demanded hard work from the students. Details became harder to obtain as the provincial government insisted only it would release information to the media and then its spokesmen refused to comment at all.

The students learnt that journalists can still obtain information without official assistance, but it requires hard work and determination. Relatives of the

injured were interviewed and more details of the story pieced together.

Paul Nengai, one of the students, said: "One evening my classmate and me went to the Acting Administrator's office to talk with him. He walked out and drove off in his car without saying a word of greetings or giving any explanation as to why he would not talk to us.

"The same evening we entered the Provincial Disaster and Emergency Service's office. Again we were not welcome and, instead, were told they had nothing to say. They directed us back to the Acting Administrator.

"Other classmates experienced the same problem. When they went to the offices of Modilon Hospital they were informed that they had received instructions not to release any more reports. Chief executive officer John Levi declined to release information.

"This attitude did not stop us. We tried our best to get the information and despite the difficulties we were able to tell the nation about the real situation of the disaster."

The National newspaper published an editorial demanding that the full truth be told and complaining the reaction of the authorities had been confused and tragically botched. It praised the doctors and nurses and the students who had been the only reliable source of information about the incident for more than a week.

Government departments started to bring emergency supplies to the aid of the injured and their families, investigations were launched and appeals for clothing and household goods showed the kindness of local people. The Consumer Affairs Council sent investigators to Madang, the director-general of the National Disaster and Emergency Services arrived to be photographed supervising the unloading on an aircraft loaded with supplies.

More photographs and stories appeared in the media — (*see Likilik Diwai tearout*) from the nurse who travelled from Brisbane to help with specialist care to the birth of a baby to one of the victims. An investigation concluded that the contamination had occurred at BP's fuel depot at Madang, while the fuel was being transferred from ship to the depot's tanks.

Student journalist, Godfried Yassafar, said: "We had to skip classes to cover the story and I learnt that when dealing with an issue like this you have to miss out on other important jobs. We had to keep following the story."

The story is not yet over. Coroner Cosmas Bidar held inquests and concluded three children and a 48-year-old woman died from complications arising from burns from fires started by the exploding kerosene lamps.

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Compensation packages for the victims are now being negotiated after BP accepted responsibility for the contaminated fuel

Did the students learn lessons from this experience? I hope so. I hope they learnt the value of talking to people involved in incidents rather than relying on officials to produce reports and summaries for them.

I hope they learnt that people recounting the details of what happened provides the essential ingredient for compelling journalism. And I hope they learnt that perseverance and determination enable reporters to overcome the difficulties of uncooperative officials.

They certainly had to grapple with the ethical dilemma of whether it was acceptable to include the screams of dying child in a radio report of the explosions and how to approach people suffering from grief.

And for journalism educators at Divine Word University there has been a need to rethink how coverage of unexpected news stories can be incorporated into a teaching system which is based on a timetable.

□ *Joe Weber is head of communication arts at Divine Word University. Since the tragedy was covered, the national newspaper Post-Courier has established a Madang "bureau" based at the university to cover the region.*

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