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Ifalik Atoll

Health Assistant interview

Conducted by Danko Taboroši

with Peter Malmai, health assistant, Ifalik Dispensary

Interview data:

Location	Informant	Date	Audio file	Language	Length
Ifalik Dispensary	Peter Malmai	08/20/15	LS100236	English	31'

Interview content:

Danko: Peter, what kind of cases do you get here at the dispensary, what is the most common complaint by people regarding their health, what are the most common issues you are dealing with here?

Peter: What we usually get, for children and babies, is infection of the ear, sometimes there is an epidemic of diarrhea, which we think is probably from drinking water. They don't cook, boil their water before they drink it. We've already put out word of advice, even show them how to cook water for 10 minutes after it starts boiling. And, for adults, unfortunately, we have lots of cases of gout. Yes, gout.

Danko: We did not see any cases.

Peter: Because they don't walk around. We have quite a number of gout cases, ranging from ages 25+. I think it is from the diet. What we understand is that it is mostly those using alcohol, eating raw fish, turtle, etc. Nowadays we have quite a number of gout.

Danko: What causes it?

Peter: That's a good question. We don't eat that much meat, it's mostly alcohol and what we consume western foods.

Danko: Does diarrhea occur in isolated cases or can it occur from all over the island at once?

Peter: Yes. We could have a couple at once. We have four villages, so during those times, two or three will come from one village, it's representative of the whole island. It usually happens when we have very short supply of water or after a tidal surge.

Danko: Do any people boil water before drinking when they are not sick?

Peter: No. Well, maybe one or two. For the little kids. We drink straight from catchments.

Danko: Have you ever done any water quality testing in the catchment tanks?

Peter: Us on the island, no. But once in a while, the Department of Sanitation from Yap will come and [inaudible] but unfortunately they never send us any results, so we don't know what's happening.

Danko: If a household has, let's say 3 tanks, 1 big and 2 smaller ones, do the people know which one has the best water and try to drink from that one sooner than from the others? Do they distinguish available rainwater tanks by the quality of water?

Peter: The way I see it is that the most recent clean one is the one they will consider safe. Families that have multiple catchments, they tend to drink from only one and use the other one for washing, cooking.

Danko: When was the last time you had a water shortage?

Peter: Just a couple of months ago, May to June.

Danko: Did everyone drink groundwater then?

Peter: No, some people still had a few gallons in their catchment tanks. We tried to conserve that for drinking. Cooking and washing is with water from wells.

Danko: If there was no more water left to drink would you drink from the wells?

Peter: Yes, we could do that.

Danko: What happens with people whose tanks completely run out of water?

Peter: They go to the neighbors and get some.

Danko: Do people use any ways to disinfect the water, for example by adding a few drops of bleach or something else?

Peter: There was one time we learned how to treat water like that but we lost the paper that tells us how much drops of bleach you should put in the tank or a well.

Danko: It cannot go directly into the well. It just works when you take some quantity of water from the well. We can tell you the exact amount calculations later. Do you have bleach on the island?

Peter: Yes, we do.

Danko: What other troubles do you have?

Peter: Adults with diarrhea, but it could be related to what they eat, maybe spoiled food.

Danko: What about more serious things? Did you ever have cholera on the island?

Peter: No, we don't have things like cholera. A couple of years ago we had an incident ciguatera poisoning with barracuda. Someone in a family caught a big, huge barracuda, the family boiled it, ate it. A couple of hours later they came down with nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps. Some of them developed skin rash.

Danko: Did they survive?

Peter: Oh, yes. We treated them, gave them medication and advised them to drink a lot of water and coconuts. They also got medication from local herbs.

Danko: Did you ever have a similar situation with turtle meat?

Peter: No. The only story we heard is the one from outer islands of Chuuk a couple of years back.

Danko: Any other incidents?

Peter: Last June, middle of June, to late July. There was an incident where there was an unusual low tide. The reef was all dry. A lot of fish died from that. Bottom fish, reef fish. Some people tried to eat them and they got sick from them.

Danko: What were there symptoms?

Peter: They came down with numbness in the mouth. And they had a funny feeling, some with lightheadedness, some with abdominal cramps. But they were mild. They walked around with it.

Danko: Why do you think the deepwater bottom fish would die if the reef is exposed?

Peter: That's the question. We don't know what causes that. Even the grouper that lives on the bottom, floats [up and comes up on the beach, thrown out by waves]. We called out sanitation office, they had a meeting with EPA, and they said that they don't have proper equipment.

Danko: Did you have any problems with foreigners, tourists, volunteers coming on island and getting sick from water?

Peter: No. They usually come with their own supply of water.

Danko: In the outer islands of Pohnpei I've heard of Peace Corps volunteers getting sick more than the local people. Have you ever had Peace Corps volunteers here?

Peter: We used to have many years back. Because of changes in the regulations and safety of Peace Corps [it stopped]. Woleai used to have but not right now. We used to have Peace Corps in the 1970s, 1980s.

Danko: If the water in the wells is boiled, and you drink it, do you feel sometimes that it is salty?

Peter: Oh, yes. I tried a couple of years back. The problem is that it has sediments in it, dirt. We boil it and pour it into another container and let settle overnight. It has a funny taste but it is drinkable.

Danko: What about salt? Is it too salty?

Peter: Yes, there is salt, but not that much. I don't know now because it's been more than 10 years that I tried that.

Danko: How is the taro doing in the taro patch? Is it healthy?

Peter: No. During typhoon Haiian, that typhoon developed close to our island. Seawater came into the taro patch.

Danko: From the ocean side?

Peter: From the ocean side into the big taro patch in the southern part of the island. And even smaller taro patches along the way on this island.

Danko: How long does it take later to re-plant the taro?

Peter: We can plant the taro, but it won't have [good roots].

Danko: How often do you think people clean up their catchment tanks?

Peter: That really depends. If it doesn't rain, people will not drain off their tanks. Until like now, that it rains. We're afraid that we might drain it off and then rain... [does not come].

Danko: Would you say that every family cleans their tank at least once per year?

Peter: Maybe more than that. Maybe 3-4 times a year. Depending on the rainy season. We provided insect screens for all the tanks.

Danko: Have you ever had a problem that someone deliberately put something bad in another person's water supply? For example, if you have families disputing over land or something else. *[Note: I did not give the reason for this question being asked, but I asked it because I heard from one resident that they found a dead cat in their tank even though the screen cover was put on tightly].*

Peter: I haven't heard anything about that.

Danko: Do you have any community-level check ups of individual tanks?

Peter: In fact, now our dispensary board society, that's what they call themselves, about 33 members from the island, representing each village, they used to do bi-monthly inspection. That includes looking at the catchments, [inaudible], signs of infestation of mosquitos, [inaudible], looking at the house to see if utensils are properly stored.

Danko: And do they still do this?

Peter: Not recently. Last May they decided to pull out, they had other reasons.

Danko: They stopped completely?

Peter: They stopped for now. We're trying to revitalize it sometimes, maybe next month.

Danko: What kind of mechanisms do you have to react if something is not up to standards?

Peter: First they came up with almost like a competition, they graded households and families, and they posted [scores] at the church so people could see the most clean house... and then it didn't work that way so they decided to sort of punish. Not really punish, but for example, if you don't clean your house, next time you come to the dispensary you will be the last one to be given medication. But it didn't work. I guess they got fed up with people not listening to what they were doing.

Danko: Coconuts help with hydration. Do you guys drink coconuts?

Peter: Oh, yes, we drink a lot of coconuts, especially when there is a water shortage.

Danko: When there is no water shortage, like right now, how much would you say you drink?

Peter: It's like 4-5 coconuts per day per head.

Danko: In normal times?

Peter: In normal times. Depending on the size of the coconut. Some are small, some are big.

Danko: How about kids?

Peter: Kids, yes, almost within that figure, 4-5 coconuts every day.

Danko: You have a lot of coconuts. Every adult can afford to drink 4-5 coconuts per day. Every family has access to so many coconuts?

Peter: Yes, everybody has access.

Danko: That's fantastic. And when there is shortage of rain, do you drink more?

Peter: Yes, we do.

Danko: When there is a drought, coconuts can get smaller, they don't have enough liquid. Did you ever feel that here?

Peter: Yes, I forgot the year exactly, but we had this, about 15 years ago, and we also had a drought, coconuts were same size but less liquid inside. Even the copra that fell on the ground, [inaudible], was less and less.

Danko: By the way, I put my mat here, and was sleeping here last night.

Peter: Oh, no problem. Here?

Danko: Yes, and I think for the next 2 nights until we leave I'm gonna sleep here because I was getting a lot of bites [by sand fleas or bed bugs] over at the men's house.

Peter: No problem.

Danko: Thanks for your time and for everything, Peter.