

Reducing the Burden of Scabies in Solomon Islands: Reflections on the World Scabies Program Transcript

Sarah Andersson 00:00:02

Welcome to the global child and Adolescent Health Podcast from Melbourne Children's Global Health. This podcast is a series of conversations with leaders in research, education and global child and adolescent health. These conversations place children and adolescents at the center of Sustainable development. Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this podcast has been produced, though are underway people and pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. Today we will be discussing the World Scabies program, or WSP for short. This is an initiative of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) and is dedicated to reducing the burden of scabies in children and their communities using public health approaches.

Scabies is the third most common neglected tropical disease or NTD with an estimated 455,000,000 cases of scabies every year globally. Scabies can lead to devastating health outcomes. Infected skin sores can result in life-threatening conditions. WSP was established with funding from the Macquarie Group Foundation and built on decades of research by MCRI around Scabies control. The program works with local governments and partners to translate that successful research into practice by implementing large scale public health programs that can benefit the whole community. WSP is currently working in Solomon Islands and Fiji to implement National Mass Drug Administration or MDA for Scabies. MDA is when medication is offered to every person in a district, province or country, regardless of whether they have signs of scabies to reduce the overall burden of disease.

And today we have a special guest with us to discuss progress of this program in Solomon Islands, where the first national MDA has almost finished Oliver Sokana is the team leader of the soon to be established NTD or neglected Tropical Diseases unit in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in Solomon Islands. Oliver has a long history of working with NTD's and Solomon Islands he has implemented programs for trachoma and soil transmitted helminths or STH. And has been the leader of the implementation of the Scabies MDA in Solomon Islands with the support of WSP, I would like to welcome Oliver to this podcast. You're welcome, Oliver. Just wondering if you could start by telling everyone a little bit about yourself and what you do at the Ministry of Health, how you kind of got to this role little bit about of your background?

Oliver Sokana 00:02:36

Thank you very much, Sarah, for having me this time. As Sarah, you mentioned already my name is Oliver Sokana and I'm working in the Ministry of Health for almost more than 30 years now, I should, I think, and I used to work in the various public health programs, including the clinics as being a nurse. I worked in so many clinics around the country and later I became the TB Coordinator in one of the provinces and then later to the Ministry since 2005.

Since then I worked with the Ministry of Health headquarters and then after that I became the National Eye Care Program Coordinator and then since 2011, and then since then I worked very much on more, more focus on Trachoma Control Program within the National Eye Care Division. Trachoma is one of the

entities and Solomon Islands yet has yet to establish an NTD unit, so some of these activities on neglected tropical diseases that exist in the country actually came through me. So that is where I actually find myself into this very interesting part of the work in which I work until today.

So, we currently have some good progress since we started and some three years back from today, we had a very good collaboration with the World Scabies Program through the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, MCRI. Now we work on the World Scabies Program so that's how I find myself into the program and it has been a very exciting and very fruitful engagement with our partners, especially MCRI at this very up till now.

Sarah Andersson 00:05:08

Great Thanks, Oliver. And I think you've worked with a number of NTD's now, right? That's trachoma, STH.

Oliver Sokana 00:05:20

Of the 20 entities that exist globally, we have 6 in total. One is, I mean one is Chagas, yaws, we have trachoma, we have STH, we have dengue fever and leprosy at the moment, leprosy is under a separate unit in which it's under, it's combined with the TB Control Program where I used to work before, so I have some experience on leprosy and dengue is currently under the vector-borne diseases. So, the focus of NTD program in the Solomons is on the four other entities, which is scabies, yaws, trachoma, and STH. I think these are the diseases that we are currently having them in our programs.

Sarah Andersson 00:06:19

So as we know, scabies can have quite devastating effects and is quite prevalent in in Solomon Islands. But with the right strategies it can be controlled. Can you talk a little bit about scabies? The scabies challenges in Solomon Islands and how it affects people's lives? In the Solomon Islands.

Oliver Sokana 00:06:46

As you rightly said, scabies affects the life of people in many parts of the world, especially also in the Solomon's, scabies has been a problem for so many years. When I was a little boy, I used to experience myself having scabies around me and then so I have some bad experience with scabies before and when I see people having scabies now I can recall what I had before too as well. So in Solomon Islands, scabies is so much everywhere it has been seen in many parts of the country. There is no specific way of determining which part of the country has scabies and which part has not? Because we can see from all around the places, especially it affects children who attended school and so many times it actually disturbed them. Apart from being a health problem, it has affected the lives of people in so many ways. There are people that they just feel about, they were stigmatized and all these social issues of skin, this actually affected and so we actually see that. The management of scabies in the country also is an issue as well until a time in which we have this collaboration and so we began to see some improvements, we

began to see some way forward in which we believe we can manage this public health problem among our people, especially that children, we see they were badly I mean highly affected at the moment.

Sarah Andersson 00:08:32

Yeah, and in so before WSP and the work that we've been doing the last three years, what was some of the challenges associated with managing scabies in the health system?

Oliver Sokana 00:08:44

People have different way of looking, seeing scabies, much of much of the time. I mean the way I look at it is that people don't think that this is a health issue. That's what people do have. They think that it's something that they can live with. They can get away with it and so, without realizing that it has some serious consequences at the end because you know scabies can cause serious implications. I mean, complications like rheumatic heart diseases and all that. So these issues, so just recently in our meeting last about two years ago when we started this program and then we mentioned about we tried to put forward our, the treatment of other ivermectin into the essential medicine list in the country, the leading physician of the National Referral Hospital actually admitted that he has seen lots of kids with rheumatic diseases in which he believes very much on the complications is coming out from scabies.

So, these are the issues that we actually faced with that we really need to identify and then move forward on how we can manage before the management of scabies, there is no active way of collecting information. There is no active way of establishing information that can lead us to actually develop a guideline in which to manage scabies in the country. In general, the treatment of skin we use benzyl benzoate. So the problem with that is that the compliance of people is very challenging, one thing. And so, when people get this lotion they actually did not apply as directed, so that is one thing I observed during my career. It's a bit of a challenge not just on the treatment, but how to actually manage it in general.

Sarah Andersson 00:11:03

So that's where we came to establishing the scabies program. So just briefly, you know, over the last three years, we've worked together to do a prevalence survey and now implementing the Mass Drug Administration under the World Scabies program. We are just almost at the end of finishing our mass Drug Administration across the whole country, so that's giving medicines to every person throughout the entire country, regardless of whether they have scabies and you have been, Oliver, a key part of our team leading this implementation. Can you talk a little bit about the Mass Drug Administration and how you feel it's gone so far and how the communities have sort of reacted to this program?

Oliver Sokana 00:11:54

Thank you very much, Sarah. So, I actually before I go into this MDA, I just want to acknowledge that the fact that we actually conducted a survey in 2021 in which we actually established the evidence of having scabies in the country people were actually moving to this MDA. So, the proportion of people that have scaled in the country is around 22%, which is really pretty much high. The rate is from 4% to 70% or 72%, which is something that we really need to address strategically in order to actually achieve our goal. The MDA is a step forward in which we began to do last year after identifying the burden of scabies in the country. It has been a very exciting undertaking. We've seen a lot of good participation and good response from the public. Though we have some challenges at the very beginning, especially on planning how to actually estimate or how to actually identify the activities that will help us actually move forward, because it's not easy, I mean it's not a small population that we want to achieve, it's a big population, it's a national population.

At the same time it's diverse geographical location of this population is pretty much challenged. So it's the challenge in terms of costing, in terms of moving around to those places, reaching the people reaching the population is all about that, and also at the same time we were in the midst of the pandemic as well. So it's a lot of issues that we actually faced with. The good news is that despite of all these challenges, we move ahead and then we manage to reach the end, we almost there now. We managed to complete every province except one that we almost we we're about to start, we continue to monitor how they move. We continue to check with them and they are ready also to start as well. So we are hoping that by the end of this month or towards end of early next month we should be able to complete all these tasks.

It was really an exciting thing to see that a lot of people actually move or positively they receive the effect of the benefit of this treatment because lots of people actually see what scabies is doing, how they were affected, which combines the families, individuals, they have scabies in them. So when they get the treatment, they actually see the effect. So it helped them. So they actually want to get it. Even as I speak now people are keep on asking for the treatment because they actually want to get it done for them. That is the thing that we really look into. So we are hoping that we will reach our target, we will reach our target. And we try to work out and see as we analyze the data, we try to see which provinces or which settings we need to get back to them and do some kind of a mop-up getting get back to the communities and then do the treatment for them or otherwise, we need to complete that so that we can complete that and then get some good achievements at the end.

Sarah Andersson 00:15:45

Yeah, and how have the communities responded to the treatment and have you been able to do feel? That we've been able to reach children and women and most people in the community.

Oliver Sokana 00:15:59

So as I mentioned that we had a very good response from people actually especially in the remote rural areas when we move in there are lots of people actually move forward for themselves and then they're bringing their children and bringing their families and then they want to collect the treatment. So that's a

good sign of people move positively. We have some challenges in other settings, especially in Honiara. You know the population in Honiara is a working population. So that is where we need to identify a good strategy so that it's one of the settings in which we want to get back and do a mop-up in them so. That is a little bit of a challenge in Honiara, but in the provinces, we do get good response from the public, especially those ones that come from the rural areas.

Sarah Andersson 00:16:47

Yeah, it's been a great effort, lots of positive response and you mentioned Oliver, some of the challenges we had with COVID, so maybe you can just talk briefly about maybe how the pandemic did it affect your ability to implement the MDA for Scabies and sort of the way it affects the way we conduct these kinds of programs.

Oliver Sokana 00:17:12

That is something that's it's really, really exciting and we, for me, I learned a lot of experience with this pandemic, especially during the time in which we actually rolled out this MDA. We start to feel some kind of a pressure when we started this, when we conducted the survey. You know, there are lots of stories about the pandemic. The vaccination is was not accepted by many people when out. For example, when our team called into their villages, the community were very reluctant. Some of them they want to chase them away because they think this is a COVID vaccination team. So, after some explanations with them before they actually accept it. So those are the kinds of things that we see. So the information about COVID actually had some impact on the MDA and the rollout of the Scabies Program. Fortunately, with our effort and the support of our partners like MCRI, the Live and Learn team here in the country and the WSP team, we worked together and then we moved forward and then we're able to address the challenging issues that we faced with during the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Sarah Andersson 00:18:41

We were somewhat worried about how people would react because of that hesitancy around the vaccine, but we. We've had a good response, haven't we? Since that time so.

Oliver Sokana 00:18:52

Yeah, that's one good thing is that we have no severe adverse reactions on the drugs that we actually Ivermectin, that we treat people on, so that is one of the advantages of our intervention at the moment. Given the fact that people get it and then they just see the positive outcome, that scabies is actually going away. So they just come for another dose. So that's a good outcome of the MDA.

Sarah Andersson 00:19:29

So can you, can you think of any particular success story from the MDA that stood out?

Oliver Sokana 00:19:36

I believe very much that we will achieve what we want, so I hope that apart from reaching the target of 85% at least, we will be able to see a reduction of scabies in the country. That is one thing. The other thing is that with this program we, we had a lot of support from the Ministry of Health. The ministry actually recognized the, this kind of collaboration actually makes some improvement to the health system as well, because we currently address what has never been undressed before, people actually have problems which can be and now we address it so that it does indicate some kind of improvement to the overall health system. That is one thing that I want to mention here. It also would, will show some positive way of I mean we actually practiced so much talk on integration. But this program actually you know we have so many diseases like yaws, scabies, STH trachoma is there so, but when we talked about the entity we just integrate together we implement things and then it becomes one. We achieve one common goal. For the same people we attended same group of people, so this is something so the Ministry actually see the benefit. The people actually see the benefit, and so we are on the right track. That's my observation. At the moment.

Sarah Andersson 00:21:23

And hopefully, people will continue to seek treatment for scabies as a result.

Oliver Sokana 00:21:28

That's exactly so with, with our, current treatment protocol is now the availability of Ivermectin in the essential medicine list. You know, and that will enable the country to procure these drugs and then they can be available at the clinic level as well. So people can have access to, especially to permit which can be prescribed by nurses who worked in the clinics and the Ivermectin can be available at the second level medical stores, and so doctors at the medical officers or that second level medical store can prescribe and give to the people that need it.

Sarah Andersson 00:22:14

Yeah, that's great. OK, so we're coming to the end. But just first before, before we go, just wondering if you can talk a little bit about your future plans within the Ministry of Health, particularly around NTDs? I know there's exciting news that we're that NTD's are becoming a unit. Can you talk a little bit about what's the plan? The NTDs in the future and the sustainability of this program.

Oliver Sokana 00:22:42

So I'm just so excited to say that the Minister of Health has is now moved forward to establishing this NTD unit after we struggled for a couple of years now, we are able to see ourselves in the process, so we are hoping that in 2024, the Ministry of Public Service will now have NTD unit exist in in the structure of the Ministry of Health. The process is now with the executive and they are just ready to, all the paperwork and all the documentation is now done and so it's now ready to be presented to the Ministry of Public Service, sometime before the end of this month, as soon as it's with the public service, then we will be just waiting to prepare all the needed work that we need to do to have this unit exist and function in the next year. Our future direction will now focus on what we have now started the three, the four diseases that we have. I mentioned yaws, scabies, and SHT and Trachoma will be in the central part of the activities or the plan of entity program.

While leprosy is still with the National TB control program, we will still continue to monitor how information is going on there as well. So, we have still some discussions with them at the moment. The other one, the dengue, is currently with the vector-borne diseases. We will also be discussing that and see how the things will we communicate together and then integrate together in some areas. We will be working on the, we have a draft on NTD policy or guideline in which WHO rendered their support and then that is an on draft at the moment. And so we will be having a meeting later on this year, we will propose it for September and so we will invite our partners together and then that will be the time we discuss about the well forward for NTD. So based on that plan, we should be able to work on and see how the NTD program we will continue. So our immediate response at the moment is to continue with this, what we are doing at the moment, the MDA and then we finished this MDA, we should be also doing a follow up survey later on this year, which is also around September as well. And then we should look at what's the next step for this scheme, this program as we move on.

Sarah Andersson 00:25:55

So congratulations, Oliver, on that unit for the neglected tropical diseases. I really think it's a great step forward for scabies and all of the tropical diseases. I think at this point I just want to thank you, for speaking with us today and thank you for all your support in implementing this program. It's been a really big effort to get to the whole country and we look forward to seeing what are the results of the final survey later this year. Do you have anything else you want to reflect on? At this point.

Oliver Sokana 00:26:33

So just to say that thank you very much for having me this time and thank you so much MCRI for the support that we received so far. We are hoping that this collaboration will continue until we really reach our goal. I just want to thank everybody that assist us, especially MCRI on scabies WHO (World Health Organization) and Kirby Institute on yaws, and the support of other partners whom we work with up until now. So I think it has been a great collaboration.

Sarah Andersson 00:27:08

Thanks, Oliver for your time. Have a great day.

Oliver Sokana 00:27:11

Thank you.

Sarah Andersson 00:27:13

Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Global Child and Adolescent Health Podcast produced by Melbourne Children's Global Health and Initiative of the Melbourne Children's Campus. Melbourne Children's Campus is a partnership between the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, the Department of Paediatrics, the University of Melbourne and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute the Melbourne Churns campus is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri in Naam, Melbourne, Australia. Be sure to join us next time.