

Media Release

24 October 2025

Hope in the Highlands: Mendi's Fight Against Cervical Cancer

In the misty valleys of Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands, the town of Mendi lies cradled among towering mountains and crystal-clear rivers. Remote and breathtaking, it's now home to a quiet revolution in women's health, led by a woman whose childhood dream became a lifeline for thousands.

From Lake Ekari to Leading Change

Sister Natha Takuna's journey began in Lake Ekari, a small village where, at six years old, she watched nurses arrive in crisp uniforms, bringing medicine and hope.

"I was so captivated by how clean and majestic they looked," she recalls. "But more than that, it was how they cared for the sick. That's when I knew—I wanted to be like them."

Since 2006, Sr Natha has served as a medical professional. Today, she is one of three pioneering nurses from Mendi Provincial Hospital trained in Human Papillomavirus (HPV) screening, through a partnership between the Southern Highlands Provincial Health Authority (SHPHA), Kirby Institute at UNSW, and the Santos Foundation. Her leadership has transformed a modest clinic into a sanctuary for women seeking care, answers, and dignity.

A Clinic That's Changing Lives

In 2023, the Santos Foundation partnered with SHPHA and the Kirby Institute to establish a Well Women's Clinic focused on early detection and treatment of cervical cancer. Located at Mendi Provincial Hospital, the clinic opened on 21 June 2024, offering screening services in a culturally safe setting.

Since opening, the clinic has seen 2,680 women, with 417 positive cases treated using thermal ablation—a same-day, first-line defence against precancerous lesions. In line with PNG's health priorities, the clinic is raising awareness, empowering women, and delivering life-saving care. Women walk for hours—some trekking up to eight hours from remote districts like Kagua-Erave, just for a chance to be screened. One story that stays with Sr Natha is of a young woman from Erave who tested positive and was admitted to the gynaecology ward.

"As soon as I applied the thermo-coagulator, she looked at me with tears and said, 'I've lived with pain for so long, and I was always afraid of what it meant for my future. Now, for the first time, I feel relief and hope.' That moment reminded me this work is not just about treatment—it's about giving someone their life back."

Building Local Capacity

Sr Natha is now a certified master trainer in HPV testing and screening, leading efforts to strengthen cervical cancer care in the Southern Highlands. She's mentoring six emerging health professionals, including Sister Shirmila Lialu and Health Extension Officer Thelma Traima, local clinicians who are helping break taboos around women's health and expanding access to life-saving services in their communities.

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A Patient's Voice

For many women, the clinic is more than a medical service—it's a source of hope. As Maria*, a mother of four from a nearby village, shares:

"I was scared to come at first, but the nurses explained everything and treated me with respect. When I got my results and received treatment the same day, I felt like a heavy burden was lifted. Now I tell other women, 'Don't be afraid—this clinic can save your life.'"

(*Name changed for privacy.)

A Tent of Hope

Currently, the clinic operates out of a tent on the hospital grounds. The heat can be stifling, and rain brings challenges, but the nurses press on, driven by purpose. A permanent building is under construction, supported by SHPHA and Petroleum Resources Kutubu (PRK). By December 2025, women will have a safe, comfortable space to seek care, a testament to what community and partnership can achieve.

Strengthening Health Systems

The Santos Foundation's partnership with the Southern Highlands, Hela, and Gulf PHAs supports efforts to strengthen health systems, ensuring services reach those in need more efficiently. The Foundation acknowledges its partners for their commitment to improving service delivery.

Dr Joseph Birisi, CEO of SHPHA, puts it simply:

"When women in their younger, productive years are lost to preventable illnesses like cervical cancer, the impact is felt across generations. The clinic is more than a medical facility, it is a symbol of empowerment."

Partnerships like the one with the Santos Foundation help remove barriers and bring life-saving services directly to the women who need them most. With specialists from the Kirby Institute, the clinic now has trained local medical staff at the forefront of this fight, screening and treating women to ensure every woman can access care.

Breaking the Silence

Cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among women in PNG, claiming around 1,500 lives each year. With rates five times higher than Australia and mortality 12 times greater, it remains a silent killer.

"There were so many beliefs," Sr Natha explains. "For many years, people didn't understand what was happening. Now, we're changing that."

The clinic's work supports the World Health Organization's global strategy to eliminate cervical cancer by 2030 and aligns with PNG's National Health Plan 2023–2027, which prioritises equitable access to essential health services.

Looking Ahead

Sr Natha and her team remain focused on delivering compassionate care that is transforming health outcomes and setting a new benchmark for locally led healthcare in the Southern Highlands. This progress is driven by strong partnerships. The Santos Foundation's support for the Southern Highlands Provincial Health Authority is helping strengthen health systems—building local capacity, expanding access, and improving service delivery. For communities across the province, it means more than treatment—it means trust, dignity, and hope.

“Every woman who walks through these doors is met with care, dignity, and hope,” says Sr Natha. “Because when women are healthy and supported, they become the driving force behind thriving, resilient communities.”

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