

The needs in East Timor

Ernest SOMERVILLE

Prince of Wales Hospital and University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

The world's newest democracy and the fourth poorest in East Asia, East Timor lies between Indonesia and Australia. It has a population of about 800,000, of whom 50% are under the age of 15 years. After the vote for independence in 1999, there was systematic and almost complete destruction of infrastructure in the country by the Indonesian army. Most of the doctors in East Timor then were Indonesians and have left the country after the independence. There are now 14 East Timorese doctors in the country and a number of foreign doctors. There is no CT scanner or EEG machine in the country and no resident neurologist.

A survey of 800 households suggested a high prevalence of epilepsy, mostly as a complication of infectious diseases. Epilepsy is viewed as a supernatural condition, resulting from evil spirits or the consumption of goat's meat. Nearly all people with epilepsy had tried traditional

treatments but very few had sought medical care, even where it was available. However, when offered to them, patients are willing to try antiepileptic medications and the compliance is high.

The Epilepsy Society of Australia has agreed to fund regular neurologist visits to supervise the diagnosis and management of patients, to train Timorese specialist health workers (nurses) and to carry out further epidemiological studies. Antiepileptic drugs, including carbamazepine and valproate are provided by the Ministry of Health, East Timor. However, funding has not been secured for coordination of the visits, clinics and training, salaries of neurologists and specialist health workers, transportation within East Timor or interpreter services. There is also a need for a national health promotion campaign to inform people that epilepsy is a treatable condition.