Speech

Ladies and gentlemen

Boys and girls it is a great pleasure for Mrs Jeffery and me to be returning to your beautiful country, a place where we had the honour to serve in the late 1960s and at Independence.

You, of course, have the privilege of being given a first rate education, an absolute essential if you are to succeed and prosper in a rapidly changing and increasingly inter connected modern world.

You also live in a country with huge potential in terms of natural gas, mining, forestry, agriculture, fishing and tourism.

But today I want to say something about a very serious social issue for your country and mine – HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS is one of the most critical challenges facing Papua New Guinea.

One study has predicted that if it spreads unchecked in your country a worse-case scenario could see 38 per cent of the PNG work force infected by 2020.

HIV spreads rapidly, particularly among young adults who are at their most productive stage in life – raising children, tending farms or working, and caring for older people.

There are no immediate symptoms of HIV infection – HIV positive people can seem perfectly healthy for several years, and therefore may not even know that they are carrying the disease. Almost anyone can catch HIV – it can spread very widely through society.

In many countries, women who have never had a partner other than their husbands are getting HIV.

But others are also vulnerable. In many countries, AIDS has caused the death of young girls, teachers, farmers, health workers, soldiers and police, truck drivers and miners. We all need to recognise that HIV could happen to anyone, and take steps to protect ourselves and those we care about from obtaining the infection.

PNG’s churches have delivered a very strong and important message: that people with HIV are no more sinners than the rest of us. It is not our place to judge others – we have a responsibility to help them.
We need to care for those who have already caught HIV and treat them with respect and compassion, as we would people who are living with any other illness or disease.

But we also have a social responsibility to prevent the transmission of AIDS.

There are some inspiring people taking the lead in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Madang.

Here at Tusab Secondary School your teachers and your students have joined the fight with innovative activities such as integrating prevention messages into the school curriculum, newsletters and talk-back radio, providing counselling for students and teacher training. I congratulate you on these important initiatives to educate the wider community – indeed, the school is developing into a model for HIV prevention in the PNG education sector.

The Bethany Centre fulfils a very important role in providing voluntary counselling and testing for people who wish to know their HIV status, providing a referral service and respite care, and distributing kits that enable HIV positive people to live with dignity.

It also provides treatment for the opportunistic infections to which people living with AIDS are particularly vulnerable.

The work done by Sister Anne and Catholic Health Services is of vital importance in managing the impact of the HIV epidemic on the community.

I am pleased that Australia, through the National HIV/AIDS Support Program, has been able to provide assistance for the purchase of the building and for aspects of the Bethany Centre’s work.

It is critical that groups like this continue to receive support – not only from donors and from the government, but from the communities they serve.

Experience from around the world shows that a community-wide effort is essential to stem HIV epidemics and help those already affected by it.

Everyone is encouraged to take an active role in preventing HIV transmission, by talking with families and partners, ensuring they understand the risk and how to protect themselves, and reaching out to those already infected and giving them our sympathy and practical support.

Australia is strongly committed to helping PNG respond to the HIV/AIDS threat. During the period 2000 to 2005, we have provided 141 million kina to help address the problem in PNG.

Australia is currently designing a new, larger five-year program of support, which will start next year.

This is likely to focus on strengthening leadership on HIV/AIDS at the national, provincial and community level; building PNG’s capacity to manage HIV; changing attitudes and behaviour; and supporting detection, treatment and care.

As you may be aware, part of Australia’s gift to PNG on the occasion of your 30th anniversary of Independence this week is a rugby league match, to be played in Port Moresby on 18September, between an Australian Prime Minister’s team, comprising players from the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) competition, and the PNG national team, the Kumuls.

Whilst here the players will promote HIV/AIDS awareness and the importance of tackling AIDS.

Re-inforcement of AIDS awareness, follows the recent visit of Australian rugby league legends to PNG in May this year, including former test captain Mal Meninga. The purpose of the visit was to raise awareness of the increasing threat posed by HIV/AIDS.

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, a high incidence of rape and violent sexual aggression against women appears to be aiding the epidemic’s growth.

We are eager to continue working with groups like the Bethany Centre, which are making an enormous difference to HIV positive people, to their families and carers, and to the communities in which they live.
But it is important to remember that, while Australia provides support for HIV, this is not a problem that any foreign country can solve by itself.

It is vital that Papua New Guineans focus on this problem – at Waigani, in provincial centres such as this, in churches and businesses, in schools and communities, and in families – in order to identify how you can address this challenge.

Every citizen has to play his or her part when confronting such a difficult and dangerous epidemic.

It is valuable work, and I am delighted that Australia has been able to play a small part in helping to make it happen.

So to you young men and women, please take close heed of the problem and determine that not only will you not put yourselves at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, but that you will do all in your power to better educate all your families and friends on how to stay healthy and safe.

The best solution of course is to stay faithful to one partner. Try it and see.

Thank you.