

Tuvalu's first female doctors return home

The people of Tuvalu live on a group of nine tiny, low-lying atolls in the mid-Pacific. With a total land area of only 26 square km for 11,000 people, many resources are scarce, including doctors. But two young women supported by Australian scholarships have made a difference.

When Miliama Simeona and Nese Ituaso returned home it had a dramatic impact on their country's health system. The number of practising local GPs doubled.

It had been a long haul – studying for nine years away from Tuvalu. But the Australian aid program had supported them all the way.

'My parents were really proud,' recalls Miliama. 'Their own education had finished at primary school on Nanumaga and they didn't have the opportunity to go to high school.'

Miliama and Nese spent their childhood years together on Nanumaga, one of the more remote islands of Tuvalu. Here, fewer than a thousand people occupied three square kilometres of land. There was no electricity, telephone or airstrip. Outside communication was limited to inter-island boats that visited a few times a year for the slow two-day trip to the capital, Funafuti.

With their parents' encouragement, the two young girls went on to attend Tuvalu's only high school.

In those days, the school didn't offer the senior year courses needed to gain entry to higher education and universities. While an Australian initiative was in train to help Tuvalu set up a senior high school program, a small aid project offered the brightest students the opportunity to study in Australia.

So with Australia's assistance, Miliama and Nese were able to complete their secondary education at Townsville's Cathedral School.

'I was 17 when I went to Townsville. It was my first time away from Tuvalu,' recalls



Tuvalu's first female doctors, Dr Nese Ituaso (left) and Dr Miliama Simeona, spent nine years training away from home supported by Australian funding. Photo: Geoff Adlide

Miliama. 'It was a very big change for us but the people there were really nice and the climate was a bit like Tuvalu's, so we didn't get too cold.'

Success at Cathedral School gained both young women entry to the Fiji School of Medicine. With the support of Australian scholarships, both emerged with their medical qualifications.

But before they could begin work as doctors, Miliama and Nese needed to do an

internship in a hospital. As Tuvalu's only hospital doesn't have the capacity to take interns, the new graduates spent their year as interns in Fiji at Suva's main hospital.

By mid-1999 they were ready to come home and Tuvalu – one of the smallest and most remote countries in the world – had its first female doctors. – GA n