

AUTUMN 2021

Thanks to you...



In Myanmar, Ma Sabai
reads your messages
of hope.

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Reflecting on 2020

When I reflect back on the last twelve months, since COVID-19 first emerged, I find myself thinking of it as a time of rapid change, learning, and perhaps most importantly an example of how as a community we come together to support each other and meet challenges head-on.

Here at Burnet we would not have been able to respond as rapidly as we did to the challenges of the pandemic had it not been for your support. I have been inspired by how dedicated and generous you have been during what can only be described as an incredibly challenging year. Thank you.

In this edition, you will hear from Dr Megan Lim with an update on the Coping with COVID-19 study, and what has been achieved thanks to your support. I am also particularly excited to share the latest findings from our long-term Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies program, which has been funded by supporters over many, many years, and is helping improve the health and wellbeing of mothers and babies in PNG.

Just before the end of the year, we shared with you the story of Ma Sabai, a teenage girl living in a small village in Myanmar, her struggles with menstruation, and the way Burnet's menstrual health program in her school changed her life. Many of you sent in handwritten notes of encouragement to Ma Sabai, some of which are included in this newsletter. Reading these notes, I am once more inspired to see how compassionate and generous our supporters are.

As we go to print, the military coup in Myanmar is still playing out and we are doing everything to support our staff, their families and the communities we work in. Burnet has worked in Myanmar for two decades, pre- and post-democracy, and our ongoing commitment to improving the health of all people in Myanmar is unwavering.

With very best wishes for the rest of 2021.

Professor Brendan Crabb AC

Director and CEO

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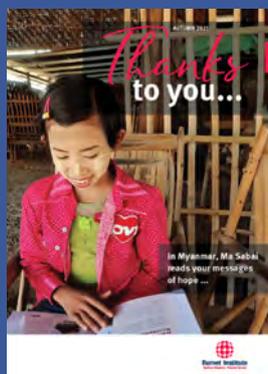
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Cover: In Myanmar, Ma Sabai reads your messages of hope.

A personal *thank you* from Dr Megan Lim



We are having a real impact on the health and wellbeing of young Australians. And everyone who was kind enough to support this study has been an important part of that.

DR MEGAN LIM, DEPUTY PROGRAM DIRECTOR, BEHAVIOURS AND HEALTH RISKS

I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to say a very heartfelt thank you to everyone who so generously supported our Coping with COVID-19 study.

The study, as you know, is about tapping directly into the experiences of the young people of Australia during this pandemic, and using the data, opinions and ideas collected to craft advice to government and health care providers. The study is giving young Australians a voice, and providing real-life solutions to those experiencing loneliness, isolation and challenges to their mental health because of COVID-19.



Thanks to you, we were able to finalise the report on Phase One of the study. We have been working very closely with VicHealth and other stakeholders to implement programs to improve youth wellbeing based on our findings.

What next? Well, thanks once again to your support, we've been able to forge ahead with the next phase of the study, which includes follow-up surveys and interviews via ZOOM.

I'm happy to report that the interviews have been completed and we are working on analysis of the findings. Design workshops to generate ideas to reduce loneliness are being conducted this month.

In short, we are having a real impact on the health and wellbeing of young Australians. And everyone who was kind enough to support this study has been an important part of that.

Once again, my sincere thanks for your generosity.



The full report, 'Young people coping with coronavirus' is available on the VicHealth website: vichealth.vic.gov.au

Thank you

from Ma Sabai

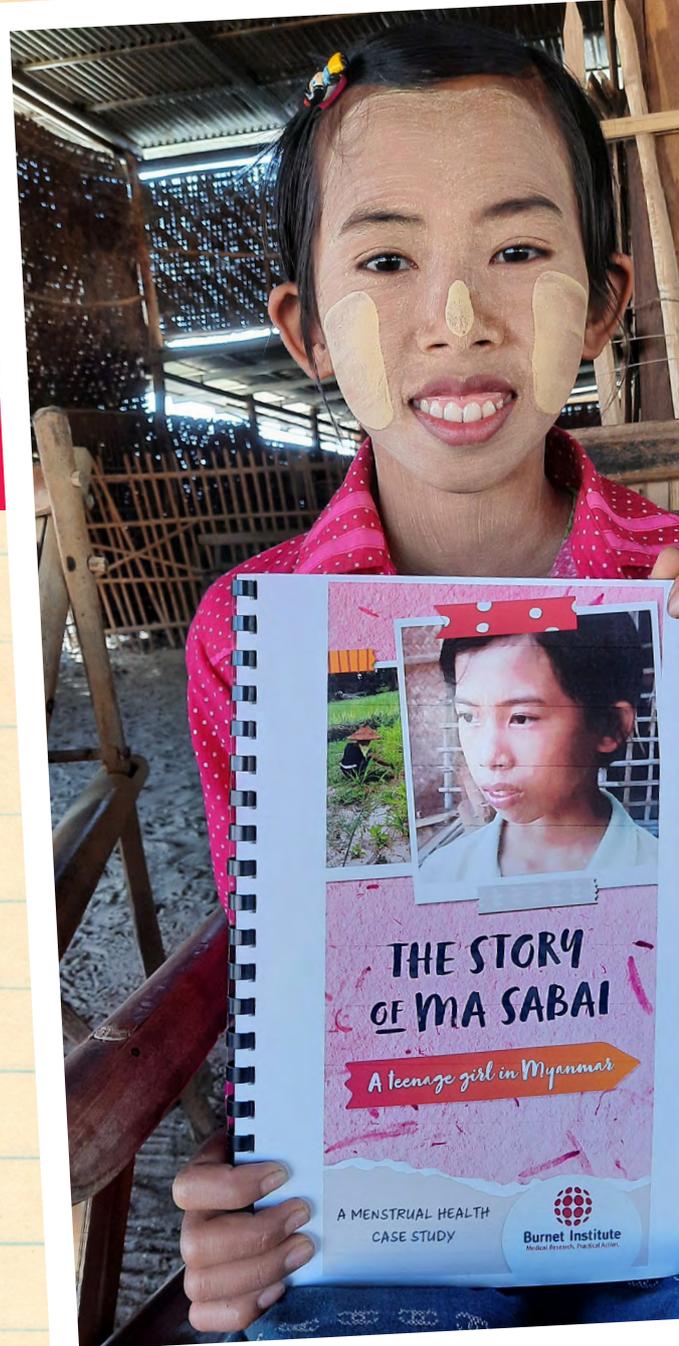
Remember Ma Sabai?

At the end of 2020, a young woman in Myanmar, 14-year-old Ma Sabai, captured hearts here in Australia when we shared her story, in her own words, about the struggle she experienced coping with menstruation, and the help she received from Burnet.

As you will remember, Ma Sabai's heartbreaking story included no access to sanitary products, lack of privacy and facilities at her school, teasing by her peers, and a general lack of understanding and knowledge of adolescent health.

Her life changed when, through her school, she was able to access the Burnet Menstrual Health program, which provided menstruation packs to girls as needed, as well as health education classes. As a result, Ma Sabai was able to take control of her own health.

Ma Sabai gave us permission to share her story so other girls would not experience what she went through. Her story helped to promote the work of Burnet's Myanmar team and raise urgent funds so they can continue to improve adolescent health outcomes and education.



“



Burnet's work to support menstrual health in Myanmar changed Ma Sabai's life. And the many people who donated to support Burnet's adolescent health work in this country are changing the lives of other young women just like her. I want to thank each and every person who donated for their compassion and for their generosity.

DR PHONE MYINT WIN, COUNTRY REPRESENTATIVE, MYANMAR

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I feel very happy and very encouraged to see the messages. They are heartfelt and inspirational. I am very thankful to everyone who donated. You are helping me and my friends at school, and lots of others as well. Thank you.

MA SABAI, MYANMAR

Thanakha, a paste made from ground bark, is a distinctive feature of the culture of Myanmar, commonly seen applied to the face and sometimes the arms of women and girls. With a scent similar to sandalwood, women use it as make-up, the most common design being a circular patch on each cheek.

How is Ma Sabai doing?

Your messages of hope could not have come at a better time.

Just like many others around the globe, Ma Sabai and her family have been severely impacted by COVID-19. In late 2020 there was a positive case found near her family home, so the surrounding houses were immediately put into lockdown, including hers.

This caused financial hardship as her family could not go out to work. It also meant the family could not go to their usual spot to collect drinking water, and they had to borrow money to buy water. In early 2021, the lockdown was over and they are able to go back out to work on odd jobs.

Ma Sabai continues to do her regular chores to help the family, collecting firewood and helping cook meals. She also continues her role as ‘cowgirl’, minding the cows, and collecting water and grass for them.

What next?

Even though schools in Myanmar are currently closed due to COVID-19, we have adapted our sexual and reproductive health classes to continue via distance learning.

These lessons now include not only the usual menstrual hygiene management information, but also information about how to guard against COVID-19. In addition, young people participating in the distance learning classes receive rice and oil for their family.

As 2021 progresses, in addition to continuing menstrual hygiene programs (in schools or via distance learning), we will also commence work on mental health and wellbeing programs.

By supporting Burnet’s work in Myanmar to improve adolescent health, you are not only empowering the young people of Myanmar today, but supporting the development of programs and expertise in the local community to empower the young people of the future.

Thank you from Ma Sabai and young people just like her all across Myanmar.

Your messages of hope

Your response to Ma Sabai’s story was amazing. Not only did you very generously send financial support to ensure Burnet’s Adolescent Health Programs in Myanmar continue, but some also took the time to write personal messages to Ma Sabai congratulating her on being brave enough to share her story, and offering encouragement and kind words.

Before the end of the year, we sent your messages to the Burnet Myanmar team. They translated them into Burmese, put them into a booklet and took them to Ma Sabai as a gift.

She was deeply touched by your messages of hope and encouragement.

* Please see the back page to read more.

How a friendship with a mum-to-be in PNG opened Margery's eyes



When I found out about the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies program being run in PNG by Burnet, it spoke to me. I thought of my friend Liven, and of all the other young women like her, expecting babies, wanting just what young mothers here want – a healthy baby. I've been donating every month ever since.

MARGERY NASH, MONTHLY DONOR, HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES

Like many others who have spent time in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Margery Nash started supporting Burnet's Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies (HMHB) program after seeing with her own eyes the sort of hardship endured by expecting mothers in that country.

Soon after her retirement as a teacher-librarian in primary schools, Margery signed up with Australian Business Volunteers, which matches people with volunteer opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region.

"They needed someone with library and training experience, which I had, so off we went to the Eastern Highlands of PNG. Friends and family thought we were mad to go to PNG. We went anyway."

Margery volunteered at an international school in Goroka where she trained the staff in the skills they needed to run the school library.

"The woman I was training to be the librarian was called Liven. She was very intelligent and easy to train, and she was also pregnant."

Working together, Margery and Liven became friends, and Margery was shocked the more she learned about Liven's life as an expectant mother.

"In the morning, she would go to the river for water, pick vegetables, make breakfast, and then get on a bus and travel an hour to work. All while heavily pregnant."

"I asked her one day if she had been having regular checkups, and found that she hadn't. She said she was afraid of asking for time off. She thought she would lose her job. Plus, it was a public hospital – she could wait all day. So I stood in for her for the day and the school driver took her to the hospital."

"She had malaria when she was a child. I asked her one day if she was tired because of her pregnancy. She said no, she was tired because she was having a bout of malaria."

"How humble it all made me feel. You almost feel ashamed of everything you take for granted. So much that we take for granted they don't have."



"Liven, with another teacher and me in the library at Goroka International School 2000."

Each edition we will feature a story from one of our supporters, like you. If you have a story you would like to share, please email: ashley.sievwright@burnet.edu.au.

A new study highlights family planning needs in PNG

Even during COVID-19, thanks to your ongoing support, we have been making significant progress in the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies (HMHB) program in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Just recently, we finalised a major new study that shows an urgent need for targeted services and strategies to improve family planning knowledge, uptake and access, plus highlights the need for male partner involvement.

Among key findings:

- More than half (55 percent) of the women reported their pregnancy as unintended.
- Few (18 percent) reported ever having used a modern family planning method, and knowledge of the different methods available was low.
- Single, separated or divorced women had almost ten times the odds of unintended pregnancy than women who were married or cohabiting with their male partner.
- Involvement of male partners in antenatal care was associated with reduced unintended pregnancy and greater use of family planning.

These findings are critical to reducing unintended pregnancies and their complications, ultimately saving the lives of mother and baby.

Margery left PNG before Liven had her baby, but they kept in touch.

“Liven had a baby boy and he was born healthy. That baby, well, he’s a young man now – he would be turning 21 this year. I remember Liven used to have plain crackers for lunch. So I would share my lunch with her. She said to me, ‘When my baby is older, I’m going to tell him he was born healthy because you shared your lunch.’”

“Speaking with Burnet about my experiences in Papua New Guinea revives such good memories for me. So many good memories ...”



“My husband Ken and I at a presentation with work colleagues, Port Moresby 2002. Traditional woven trays and bilums (string bags). I am wearing mine on the back of my head like the women do.”

“



I want to personally thank everyone who is supporting the HMHB program in PNG. We are just now entering our seventh year. In that time we have had a number of dedicated supporters standing alongside us all the way, including monthly donors like Margery. And each year new supporters join us. I can assure you all that your ongoing support remains critical to improving the lives of mums and babies in PNG. Thank you.

PROFESSOR JAMES BEESON, HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Your messages to Ma Sabai

At the end of 2020, a young woman in Myanmar, 14-year-old Ma Sabai, captured hearts here in Australia when we shared her story, in her own words, about the struggle she experienced coping with menstruation, and the help she received from Burnet. Many of you sent a message of hope to Ma Sabai, and below is just a small selection of the things you had to say to her.

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It was lovely reading about you and how the Burnet Institute has improved your life. You are a lovely young woman, hardworking, and with a good future ahead of you. Do the best you can at school. Education is very important.

Denise Shakespeare.

*

All women and girls need to feel safe and secure about their bodies. I was impressed to read of your courage and desire to help other girls.

Else Foster.

*

I wish you all the very best for your future studies and leadership training. I believe that whatever you choose to do in life, you will be an encouragement to your peers and to young people who come after you. All the best.

Kate Aeberli.

*

We here in Australia want to encourage you to lead and help your people. We think of you and wish you the very best. My mother was born in what was the capital, Rangoon, but she left years and years ago. But I am still sentimental about Myanmar.

Lily Kahan.

*

Wishing you a very safe journey through these difficult times. Chase your dreams and have a wonderful life.

Margaret Willersdorf.



Head Office
85 Commercial Road
Melbourne, Australia, 3004

Tel: +61 3 9282 2111
Email: info@burnet.edu.au
burnet.edu.au

burnet.edu.au/support
[/burnetinstitute](https://www.facebook.com/burnetinstitute)
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We have offices or representatives in Australia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and China, and also contribute to activities in other African, Asian and Pacific countries.

