LATE LAST year, Dr. Michael “Mick” Alkan got a call from the Israeli Foreign Ministry. “There’s a hospital ship out of Australia sailing to remote places in Papua New Guinea and they want Israeli medical volunteers. Can you organize a team?”

The answer was clear: Within a short time Alkan had recruited 26 volunteers, in partnership with the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer, including internists, midwives, dentists and two complete teams to perform eye surgeries.

A professor emeritus of medicine at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Alkan may hold the Israeli record for the number of medical missions he has participated in or led abroad over the years. And at age 76, Alkan, known for being among the first on the scene to provide medical relief to victims of disasters worldwide, was off again, this time to the Pacific Islands.

The ship in Papua New Guinea is an initiative of the global Christian organization Youth with a Mission (YWAM), which, among other projects, charts medical ships around the world.

Most of the population of Papua New Guinea lives in remote, rural areas scattered over rugged terrain, criss-crossed by complex river systems. The YWAM medical

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ship is actually a catamaran, whose keel is only two meters below the sea so it can cross reefs and travel up rivers along the often uncharted coastline.

The volunteers' challenge is accessing these isolated communities with medical supplies and specialists, including midwives. The teams leave the ship via dinghies or speed boats, and then walk to the villages to carry out emergency medicine, primary care, immunizations, physiotherapy, optometry and even health education.

"This was an unbelievable adventure," says Alkan of his most recent mission. "Every day we'd go to a different village and have a wonderful welcome, really bringing health care to places where there is none."

**ALKAN'S PASSION** for medical missions abroad began in 1979, when the newly elected government of Menachem Begin offered aid to Cambodian refugees who had fled across the border into Thailand to escape the genocide in their native country.

Alkan was asked by the Israeli army to lead a team of doctors and medics at a field hospital in Thailand run by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In 1999, he headed the internal medicine clinic at an Israeli field hospital for Kosovo refugees in Macedonia.

Today it seems there are few remote places on the globe where Alkan, a world-renowned expert on AIDS and other infectious diseases, hasn't led or participated in dozens of medical missions abroad, or has helped set up treatment centers for infectious diseases or community-oriented medical schools.

Some of the medical rescue teams he has led have been to help victims of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, the 2004 tsunami in the Far East, and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. He has also taught medicine in rural Kenya, Ecuador, Nepal, and Kyrgyzstan.

In 2005, when Alkan received an invitation to join the front lines of the war on AIDS in Africa by setting up clinics in a remote village in the desert plains of Botswana, his response was immediate: "When does the next plane leave?"

Many of the medical missions have been supported by the Department for International Collaboration of the Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Other missions have been run by IsraAid and Natan, the main Israeli humanitarian organizations which operate throughout the world.

"I think he is an amazing doctor," says IsraAid co-CEO Yotam Polizer, recalling Alkan's participation in the mission to Nepal, and most recently, advising IsraAid teams in Greece dealing with refugees from Syria. Polizer notes Alkan's "experience, his education, his creativity in finding medical and technical solutions in a chaotic and complicated environment."

One of Alkan's regular "beats" is teaching every year at the medical school and school of public health in Gondar, Ethiopia. "The Ethiopian health authorities have concluded that there will never be enough Ethiopian doctors to take care of all the AIDS patients in Ethiopia so they're recruiting doctors from abroad to teach nurses how to treat AIDS patients," he explains.

Alkan was one of the founders of the Ben-Gurion University Medical School in the early 1970s. The School was launched on a revolutionary concept at the time: early clinical exposure. "We wanted our students to see patients from day one, not to play doctor, of course, but this is much more relevant than dissecting a frog," he says.

Another innovation was the school’s community orientation. "At the time, we didn't know how to run a medical school," Alkan concedes, "but we knew that we wanted the students to enjoy their studies, so we'd try everything that's new and innovative. Now all these years have passed and our graduates are woven into the medical system of Israel; two members of that first class are deans of medical schools in Israel, others are top-notch scientists, and many of them still live and practice in the Negev."

Alkan also played a significant role in planning the curriculum for BGU's English-language Medical School for International Health, founded 20 years ago, the only medical school of its kind in the world. Established initially as a joint venture with the Columbia University Medical School, MSIH was designed to train a new type of physician, one who could provide health care for populations throughout the world, but who would also develop special skills for dealing with multicultural populations.

"Israel is a fantastic place for practical experience prior to going out into the real world and the developing world. I think it's been a success story in many ways," says Alkan.

Between missions abroad, Alkan still teaches at BGU, running a course for graduate students on medical aspects of disaster relief. He is also the medical director of the Open Clinic of Physicians for Human Rights in Tel Aviv.

Alkan’s most recent medical adventure in Papua New Guinea was proposed by Yaron Dadon, the Israel Pacific Islands advisor.

"We'd been trying to help our friends in the South Pacific islands find doctors they really need for all their health issues," Dadon recounts in a phone interview from Australia, explaining that the Papua New Guinea islanders are unwilling to accept medical help from Australia. "I know this sounds really crazy, but the only people they are willing to accept help from is Israelis. When I travel to these remote villages, the people come to welcome you and sing 'Hatikva!'"

An Israeli ENT (ear, nose and throat) team brought by the Israeli Embassy to Fiji last year performed 75 surgeries in five days, relates Dadon, but says that reaching island rural areas that have no roads and that are surrounded by water seemed impossible. "Then I discovered the perfect solution – YWAM's floating hospital, which would allow the teams to access the villages," he
says. "Then we turned to Mick Alkan because we knew of his experience organizing teams. He took up the challenge; he understood exactly what we needed.

"We were able to bring something different on the level of expertise, including top-notch surgeons from Sheba Hospital," adds Dadon.

THE ISRAELI medical team "really captured the hearts of the people living in these remote communities," says Anna Scott, public relations and media manager of YWAM's medical ships in Australia. "There's a lot of strength in terms of their skills and expertise that have been really well received by the people. Some professions are harder to find for the ships, particularly eye specialists, and that's where the Israeli team came in.

"Sometimes it was quite life-changing, when patients walked in blind and the next day they could see after the surgeries," adds Scott.

The Papua New Guinea mission was Israel's first with YWAM. Other Israeli doctors are expected to volunteer in the future.

"The land of the unexpected" is Papua New Guinea's slogan. As someone who, one assumes, has seen every malady in existence, was there anything Alkan saw on this particular mission that he'd not seen before?

Yes, he relates, a case of elephantiasis (Lymphatic filariasis) in which the feet swell up like elephants' feet, a condition caused by parasitic worms. "This wasn't a total surprise because it's a tropical country so you'd expect to see tropical diseases that are not known anywhere else," he explains. "To my amazement, we saw this on only one island; we visited 42 villages on many islands, but there was only one island that was infested with this." Luckily, Alkan found medicine to treat the condition on board the ship and also administered preventative de-worming drugs to all the village children.

Writing in a memoir about his many medical missions over the years, "Attachment, a Doctor’s Letters from Faraway Places," Alkan muses: "I keep finding these God-forsaken spots on Earth. Repeatedly, I go back to the places which are remote and poor, dirty and primitive… but I look back on the weeks of teaching, on the many patients I have seen, and I feel very strongly that I have made a difference."