

## Dengue Fever in Micronesia, 1974

*Letter from Karen Knudsen to her mother describing husband Greg Knudsen's bout with dengue fever during their Peace Corps service as teachers in Truk (Chuuk), Micronesia, in 1974. Karen later came down with the fever, too.*

November 10, 1974

Dear Mom,

Boy, I hope you never get a letter as miserable as this from me again. Right now everything is so bad! Things are just falling apart.

The major issue at hand is "sicknesses!" Peace Corps people are being plagued! Nick and Karla left Saturday for Washington – they terminated because Nick developed a bleeding ulcer. (Also last week, Gedell terminated, it was a family emergency, and so did Mike B. Four Volunteers in ONE WEEK.)

Kathy on Moen was in the hospital last week with 105° temp for two days, being fed thru IVs. On Saturday when we were on Moen, Mike had just taken Laurie to stay at the hospital – same high fever, vomiting, and she has amoebas.

Jackie and Doug from Dublon were both kept on Moen for several days because they were so ill. Rod (Dublon) has amoeba and that high fever sickness, and Linda, too, has been hit with it.

My major concern is Greg. For one week he was alternating between 101° and 103-1/2°. He also had a headache so bad he couldn't raise his head.

I thought his fever had broken last Thursday night. Anyway, I had awakened soaking wet (my first thought was OH NO! I WET THE BED!!) but it was Greg perspiring like mad. In the morning, his fever was down to 99°. He went to school Friday, but his temp soared.

Saturday we went into Moen to shop. The boat ride in was dramatic. It was pouring and we were freezing. The waves were incredible!! Our little boat got tossed and turned – I got cramps in my fingers and arms from holding on so tight! On the way home, our motor died and Greg and I had to jump into another boat, the sea was still storming.

Anyway, Greg went to sleep Saturday night at 6 p.m. and didn't wake up until Monday morning. I had to force him to drink water and soup – he was OUT OF IT! And so hot! I spent hours sponging him off and fanning him.

Monday he felt better. (After all that sleep!) I went to school to find out that out of six Peace Corps Volunteers, I was the only one not sick. That meant only two classes for my 10th graders, and the 9th graders were running wild.

When I got home, Greg had accidentally broken our lantern. He was so mad at himself and such a grump. I was wishing he'd go back to sleep again. (He was so good and pleasant when he was really sick, even though he was so uncomfortable.)

I was exhausted after having been up with him during the nights and getting very little sleep, so I went to bed really early. I again woke up to him cursing and fussing. He was restless – his feet itched. I turned over to try to sleep – all night long I was aware the lamp was burning (we have two). He was pacing the floor, going outside, etc., etc. At 5:30 a.m., he really was freaking out! I was assuming it was the aftermath of having a fever that long and sleeping so long. (I had also heard it affects your nervous system, so I thought his nerves were acting up.)

He didn't lie down all night – again the itching. By now it had spread.

We went to school. I was upset. He was upset and tired (sleepy!).

After the first hour he came to my room and a rash was spreading up from his feet and hands.

We walked to the Air Force medic. By then his arms and legs were all splotchy.

Diagnosis: GERMAN MEASLES!!

Swell!! Apparently itching is characteristic? I am dreading tonight. Doc gave him some pills to make him relax because the itching is still driving him nuts!!

It's one thing being out here with few luxuries when you feel fine, but when you're sick it's a real pain.

HAVE I EVER HAD GERMAN MEASLES? I HOPE SO!! I'm not sure if that high fever is a flu or the "Tangky"\* (Tangky carried by mosquitoes.) I've heard both. It's affecting Volunteers and Micronesians all over Micronesia: Ponape has had a lot of cases as has Saipan and Palau.

—— 2 DAYS LATER ——

The worst was yet to come with Greg's itching. It was driving him wild! Again, no sleep and he wasn't making any sense. He kept pacing and pacing, saying "If they'd just learn the fractions I could go to sleep"[he taught 10th grade math].

He was so tired he was awake but still sleep talking. I was weeping and scared. Finally, after taking two relaxer (pills Doc gave him) and two Excedrin P.M. he fell asleep after being up for 37 hours.

He is much better now. I don't think it was the measles. Jackie, Mike, and Connie have all had the same horrible ITCH after their fever bout.

Poor Connie has had the Tangky, amoeba, worms, the itch, and a kidney infection. Think they might go home. She says she just couldn't face another bout of sickness like that.

\* Tangky: Karen and Greg's students kept calling the sickness Tangky – a distortion of the word Dengue and the Trukese word for flashlight, from the Japanese word tanki for electricity. The students said the pressure behind the eyes and loss of energy felt like a flashlight with low batteries – thus Tangky.