Alpers and I thought that it might be nice to write a clinical paper describing my findings. The paper was not ready until the spring of 1982, since my time was consumed by studies in my laboratory on the purification of the scrapie agent.

Preparation of the kuru paper coincided with my introduction of the prion concept in the spring of 1982 (Prusiner 1982). So in the kuru manuscript, I used the term ‘prion’ when I described the unusual properties of infectious pathogens causing kuru, CJD and scrapie. Alpers thought that Gajdusek should be an author, so I added his name to the byline, not anticipating what was to come. Once Gajdusek read the paper, he indicated to me his displeasure with the use of the word prion. When I argued about his objection, Gajdusek contended that using prion would mean that he approved of the word, and he did not. After some discussion, Alpers and I decided that I should back down, and so the word prion appears nowhere in the paper (Prusiner et al. 1982).

The kuru story is a legend in the history of medicine. It opened new vistas in the study of neurodegeneration, and it stimulated many people to read about exotic tropical diseases. The disappearance of kuru is a wonderful event in the lives of many people living in the New Guinea highlands.

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‘Most people still believe that kuru is caused by sorcery’

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This is the second time I have come to England to the MRC Prion Unit. I have been working for the Kuru Research Project in the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research for 6 years. Now, I am the Community Liaison Officer. I am also the community leader of Waisa Village. In our kuru studies, I work closely with Jerome Whitfield and Michael Alpers.

In the early 1960s, when I first saw Michael Alpers in Waisa, I was 7 years old. Michael has always been a good friend of our family. The kuru research work went ahead successfully. Later Michael became the Director of the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research. The Institute studies all the sicknesses of Papua New Guinea and we are pleased to have Prof. Peter Siba now as its Director.

My late father Mr Puwa helped Michael with his work and supported him personally. He assisted with the examination of patients and the collection of samples from patients and others. He explained to the family and community why these samples of blood, brain and the like were needed. Working together, my father and Michael made a film on traditional salt making, a skill and technology that has now died out, since my father was the acknowledged salt maker of the village.

Although most people still believe that kuru is caused by sorcery, there are a few of us who understand how it came to our people. I am very happy about all the research work for the last 50 years that has given us this understanding.