

What we need are ICTs... for ICsT: Information, communication, coordination, and training!

A little more than five years ago, in December 1996, our network, the PPHSN, was established under the joint institutional and technical auspices of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), primarily by the representatives of Pacific Island countries and territories to the Pacific Islands Meeting in Public Health Surveillance. Its goal: To improve public health surveillance in the Pacific Islands, in a sustainable manner.

A few months later, in April 1997, in accordance with the communicable diseases surveillance and response focus initially recommended by PPHSN patrons, **PACNET** was launched. It was the first of the PPHSN operational services to be offered to health professionals who are members of the network. It was also the first telehealth application, regional by nature, together with the WPHNet (Western Pacific HealthNet), a telemedicine initiative of the Pacific Basin Medical Association (PBMA).

In April 2000, in order to improve regional and national CDs surveillance and response capacities, **LabNet** was established — the PPHSN public health laboratory network. Part of the plan was to support LabNet and enhance its efficiency by offering the following ICT services: a specialised mailing list (PACNET-LAB), a PACNET sub-list to better accommodate epidemic-related confidentiality and sensitivity issues (PACNET-Restricted), and an encrypted website where laboratory data could be stored and picked up by authorised professionals. The website is yet to be completed, but both mailing lists are up and running.

In December 2001, the first of the three sub-regional **EpiNet** workshops took place in Guam. It gathered 20 Micronesian national EpiNet team members who worked on the development of PPHSN guidelines for the surveillance of and response to leptospirosis and cholera — two of the six PPHSN target-diseases.¹ These teams, from countries all around the region, are now tasked to improve CDs surveillance and response at national and regional levels. To achieve this goal, their members will have to be strongly networked at various levels — nationally, between islands, and with the regional pool of resources. Clinicians (nurses and doctors), animal health specialists, biologists, laboratory technicians, epidemiologists, environmental health specialists, entomologists, and other health workers, all will have to communicate smoothly and promptly. Information will have to be relevant, useful, and available — to the right people, at the right place, at the right time. Ongoing, widely accessible, and affordable education and training programmes will be crucial: Distance education will have to reach for new horizons, and tangible, sustainable outputs will have to be achieved in human resources development.

In the Pacific, good ICTs applications have become an obvious *must* — to improve public health surveillance in a sustainable manner by promoting information, communication, coordination, and training (ICsT).

Already in 1995, the members of what is today the PPHSN Coordinating Body had prepared PPHSN's groundwork with a common vision that, especially in the Pacific, efficient public health surveillance required the networking of skilled people and the coordination of available resources, and the use of the comparative advantages of modern information and communication technologies — the now world-famous ICTs. But they also realised that any

¹ The full list is: dengue fever, measles, influenza, leptospirosis, cholera, and typhoid



ICT application must be relevant to PICTs' practical needs and involve sustainable use of resources, and that resultant benefits or savings should primarily be re-invested for the improvement of health services delivery, according to the PICTs' own priorities.

In this 10th issue of *Inform'ACTION*, all contributions will touch upon PPHSN members' continuous need, not only for ICTs — information and communication technologies, but also for ICsT — information, communication, coordination and training:

- from leptospirosis' practical significance in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and French Polynesia, to the draft recommendations of the first EpiNet sub-regional workshop;
- from bio-terrorism threats — illustrated by recent anthrax attacks — to the bottom-line need for improving national and regional CDs surveillance and response across the board;
- from globally and regionally adapted 'open learning' conceptual frameworks, to the practical and computer-assisted 'learning-by-doing' 3rd SPC Training Module on the practice of public health surveillance and the use of Epi Info (analytical epidemiology).

Last but not least, attached to (but detachable from) this 10th issue of *Inform'ACTION* you will find a thorough index of all topics addressed and papers published to date in the ten issues of your PPHSN bulletin. We believe this index is a fair reflection of what we, as a network of professionals, have been willing or able to discuss, since July 1998, through the peculiar PPHSN conch shell that is *Inform'ACTION*, which is made of paper but also based on ICTs.

We do realise these are different ways of blowing the shell. We sincerely hope our editorial line and efforts are well understood and that they encourage many more contributors — more of you — to feel like blowing that shell.

The whole *Inform'ACTION* SPC editorial team joins me to wish you all the best of life for 2002.

Enjoy your reading.

Yvan Souarès



A regional ICT Needs Assessment Workshop was hosted at SPC Noumea in August 2001, which was co-organised by SOPAC, the Secretariat of the Forum of the Pacific Islands, and SPC (see paper 'ICT and distance education for Pacific Islands health workers'). The health sector was duly represented at that workshop. Not only were health services-related ICT needs and current developments reviewed within one of the working groups, but Dr Yvan Souarès also had the opportunity to present PPHSN and the various ICT applications in use among our network.

The Workshop completed a draft policy and asked the CROP ICT Working Group to complete the work on the draft regional ICT Strategic Plan. That draft has just been released (January 2002) and has been posted to member countries for review and feedback. The final draft will be tabled at the proposed Forum Communication Minister's Meeting, scheduled for April 2002, for endorsement. We'd like to encourage and facilitate a wider dissemination of these key regional ICT documents within the PPHSN (e.g., Coordinating Body members, PICTs Health Ministers, Directors of Health, EpiNet national team members) in order to gain feedback and, moreover, to take the opportunity to enhance the representation of health services' ICT needs at the ministerial meeting in April. Copies can be obtained from SPC upon request. Mail to christinel@spc.int OR phs.cdc@spc.int

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