

The Flexible Learning and Telehealth Unit at the Fiji School of Medicine

**Working with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and other regional
development partners to increase access to distance consultation and
distance education for Pacific health professionals**

The Fiji School of Medicine (FSM) has established its Flexible Learning and Telehealth Unit (FLTU) with FJD 350,000 of assistance from the Australian Government as part of AusAID support to postgraduate training at FSM. The telehealth activities overseen by FLTU will be delivered with additional assistance from Ericsson Electronics worth FJD 220,000. Further funding from other regional and international donors is anticipated and will allow for the development of a wide range of related services. These developments allow FSM to work collaboratively with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and other regional development partners in realising the goals of a Flexible Learning Program and a Telehealth Program that will see health training and telehealth services made more accessible to health professionals from throughout the region.

FLTU is co-directed by Dr Sitaleki Finau, FSM Professor and Head of the School of Public Health, and Dr Jan Pryor, FSM Director of Research and Academic Development. FLTU is provided guidance through the Flexible Learning and Telehealth Advisory Group with members representing SPC, WHO, USP, AusAID, NZAid, and regional countries.

The planned telehealth services are designed primarily as an Internet-based resource, which is nearing completion and which will provide support in the three areas of:

- distance education,
- distance consultation, and
- distance health-related information.

The service will support the areas of public health, medicine and allied health, and is being designed around a 'one-stop-shopping web-page.' To ensure equity for those without the Internet, the service will develop mechanisms to provide access to services via email, facsimile or telephone.

The FSM and SPC will be working collaboratively using complementary Internet-based services and links. While being transparent to the user, some of these services will be hosted at SPC's computer server in Noumea and others will be hosted at a computer server in Sydney through support from Curtin University and Optus Communications.

Flexible learning and distance education

'Flexible learning' is a process of learning and teaching that is learner-focused and that applies teaching modes that best serve the learner through accessibility and relevance. Distance education is one of the delivery formats for flexible learning.

In line with FSM's flexible learning objectives, health-training programmes will be made available through FSM to health professionals throughout the Pacific in various ways and using different technologies, including paper-based distance delivery, summer schools, computer-based CD-ROMs, web-based techniques, and other appropriate methods. With assistance from the Extension unit at the University of the South Pacific, FSM is developing distance-capable courses in several undergraduate and postgraduate disciplines. This activity will also take advantage of previous efforts by SPC in the development of training modules in epidemiology and public health surveillance.

Eventually, a range of methods including on-line training, short courses, summer schools, visiting lectureships, and other flexible learning modes will allow health professionals in the region to study at a distance in various health professional areas, some via links provided through the Telehealth Program organised as a 'Pacific HealthNet.' These types of activities will benefit those who cannot take the time off from work for full-time study and who need to upgrade their skills and qualifications.

Distance consultation

A service managed by FSM and in collaboration with a pool of consultants, will provide Pacific health professionals with access to distance consultation from their peers, specialists and experts from throughout the region. This activity will involve the sharing of information and imagery electronically as part of a virtual dialog between healthcare professionals in the region. This activity is similar to telemedicine services being offered in other parts of the world, but the FSM service will offer a wider range of consultation services including those in the areas of public health and allied health.

Distance health-related information

'Pacific-specific' information services will be developed by FSM and SPC to meet the unique needs of healthcare personnel in the region. The establishment of this service will see an increased access for regional professionals to appropriate health-related information. This will allow remote providers to access information not otherwise available for their own professional development, to assist in the care of their patients, and for the development of relevant programs, policies and projects. This activity will also increase networking between health professionals throughout the Pacific region.

Benefits

The efforts of FSM, SPC and other regional development partners to deliver flexible learning and telehealth services through FLTU will assist in overcoming the common challenges of physical and professional isolation. This activity also addresses the key issue of affordability of services and training, and the need to increase interaction between health professionals in the region. As such, the beneficiaries of these new services and related developments will be the health professionals in the Pacific region and those that they serve.

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