

Health Metrics Network – Pacific launch

“Everyone counts.” This is the firm belief behind the Health Metrics Network (HMN), a global initiative that has recently extended its activities to the Pacific. “Better Information. Better Decisions. Better Health.” Following this reasoning, HMN aims to improve the quality of health information and its availability to decision-makers, with the goal of improving the quality of decisions based on such information, and the ultimate goal of improving everybody’s health.

Health information systems (HIS), as addressed by HMN, comprise two main areas: population-based information, collected for example through censuses, health surveys and vital event registration, and health-service-based information, usually collected by staff at health facilities regarding patients. Consequently, HMN’s main in-country partners are representatives and senior technical staff from national statistics offices as well as from ministries of health.

At a regional meeting – the HMN Pacific Launch – held at SPC headquarters in Noumea from 30 October to 1 November 2006, the HMN framework and an assessment tool for countries’ HIS were presented and discussed.

The assessment tool covers six areas: resources, indicators, data sources, data management, information products, and dissemination and use. Most of these are further divided into sub-areas. Assessment of resources, for instance, looks into policy and planning, HIS institutions, human resources and financing, and HIS infrastructure. Underneath, targets are listed that according to the developers, reflect necessary or important features of a functional HIS. The actual state of an HIS is assessed as ‘Highly adequate’, ‘Adequate’, ‘Present but not adequate’ or ‘Not adequate at all’ against each of the targets, using predefined criteria. Based on this, scores for areas and sub-areas are calculated and visualised.

The tool addresses many issues that are at the centre of PPHSN’s activities or are a precondition for meaningful communicable disease surveillance. Some targets are rather general, e.g. “The country has adequate capacity to (1) diagnose and record cases of notifiable diseases, (2) report and transmit timely and complete data on these diseases, and (3) analyse and act upon the data for outbreak response and planning of public health interventions.” Others are very specific. For example:

“For each of the key epidemic-prone diseases and diseases targeted for eradication/elimination, appropriate case definitions have been established and cases can be reported in the current reporting format.”

“A ‘metadata dictionary’ exists that provides data-variable definitions as well as their use in indicators, specification of data collection method, periodicity, geographic designations, analysis techniques used and possible biases.”

“A complete list of public and private sector health facilities exists and is updated every year.”

“Identifier codes are available for health facilities and administrative geographic units (e.g. province, district, municipality) to facilitate merging of multiple databases from different sources.”

“Surveillance data are disseminated and fed back through regularly published weekly, monthly or quarterly bulletins.”

The meeting participants applied the tool in group work to their countries’ HISs, gained confidence in using it and made valuable suggestions for further amendment. Some sections need adaptation to the regional situation, particularly to small island states. It was agreed that the tool developers would work on the suggestions and come up with an adapted version.

The assessment itself should preferably be done in teams, bringing together relevant stakeholders and experts in-country, with external support if required. HMN has small grants available for facilitating this process and awaits applications. The PPHSN Coordinating Body Focal Point at SPC’s Public Health Programme is also available for technical assistance on request, particularly

with regard to the health-service-based part of HISs, while SPC's Statistics & Demography Programme (email: Stats&Demog@spc.int) can provide assistance regarding the population-based part.

Further information about the Health Metrics Network can be found at www.who.int/healthmetrics.

Dr Justus Benzler
SPC Communicable Disease Surveillance Specialist