

ICT and distance education for Pacific Islands health workers

Telecommunications and distance education were named as top priorities for Pacific Islands health services during the first Pacific Telehealth Conference, held at SPC's Noumea headquarters in December 1998.

A few years have gone by since then, and interest in information and communication technologies and distance education for health workers in the Pacific has considerably increased. So have related activities.

In that light, the Pacific Information and Communication Technologies Needs Assessment and Strategy Planning Workshop, held at SPC Noumea in August 2001, chose the theme 'Information and communication technologies for every Pacific Islander.'

SPC helps make ICT vision a reality

The 1998 Pacific Telehealth Conference was organised by the Pacific Basin Medical Association and by SPC's Public Health Surveillance and Communicable Disease Control section (PHS&CDC), focal point of the PPHSN Coordinating Body. At the conference, a regional working group on Distance Education in Health was created. After an enthusiastic beginning, the group became dormant; but it was reactivated last year when the University of Guam (UoG) and SPC decided to go ahead with the initial plans: a Distance Education website funded by UoG and developed by SPC. The website is nearing completion; a preliminary version is already operational. You are most welcome to visit it at <http://www.spc.int/health/DistanceEducation> and send your comments to the working group (email to: christellel@spc.int).

Papers presented at the Pacific Telehealth Conference, along with conference proceedings, formed the basis of a special issue of Pacific Health Dialog on 'Telehealth in the Pacific' – published in 2001 and available on-line at <http://www.spc.int/phs>¹.

The PHS&CDC section, within the PPHSN framework, is also involved in training activities in the whole region. The training module developed by the section in 1999, 'Advanced Training in the Practice of Public Health Surveillance and the Use of EpiInfo 6 Software,' included a half-day session on PACNET and Internet services such as email, World Wide Web, File Transfer Protocol and Telnet.

This year, the SPC team worked on the development of the Distance Education website. It also made its own contribution to distance education for the Pacific Islands by producing a third module to complete its Public Health Surveillance training programme. The new module covers the investigation and control of outbreaks, especially the use of analytical epidemiology; it is adaptable for distance learning over the World Wide Web. Kevin Carroll's article in this issue describes it in detail.

¹ Editor's note: A French version will be soon available as well.



This module is complementary to the first two modules, 'Basic Training in Public Health Surveillance and the Use of EpiInfo 6 Software' and 'Advanced Training in the Practice of Public Health Surveillance and the Use of EpiInfo 6 Software.' Those modules are known by many Pacific Island public health practitioners who have participated in PHS&CDC training workshops since 1998.

SOPAC, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and SPC's Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) section jointly organised a workshop on Pacific ICT needs assessment and strategy planning, held from 27-31 August 2001 in Noumea, New Caledonia. The workshop was sponsored by the governments of Australia, France and New Zealand. It brought together representatives from Pacific Island countries and territories to complete a draft regional ICT policy and strategic plan. The policy sets out a framework of principles and policies to guide future policy development and co-operation. The workshop asked the ICT working group of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) to co-ordinate further regional efforts to have this policy recognised by stakeholders in the development of their national ICT policies. Final versions of documents coming out of this conference, including the guiding principles and the final draft strategy, can be downloaded from the SPC website <http://www.spc.int/it/ictnoumea/papers.htm>.

The PHS&CDC team participated in this important workshop, and made the most of this opportunity to distribute copies of the Pacific Health Dialog telehealth issue – an excellent occasion to point out the specific ICT needs of Pacific Islands health services!

WHO involvement

The WHO Meeting of the Ministers of Health for Pacific Island Countries, convened in Palau in March 1999, adopted the 'Palau Action Statement,' which recognised the increasing importance of distance education and in-service training. The meeting called on the World Health Organization (WHO) to examine the different models in use and review the appropriateness of existing learning resources.

In a follow-up meeting held jointly by WHO and SPC in Madang, Papua New Guinea, in March 2001, WHO presented a paper on open learning and a regional strategy and telehealth project for Pacific Island countries. The meeting recognised that the term 'open learning' incorporates the delivery of distance education through traditional methods and the use of new technology. The meeting recommended that the development of open learning in any country should be based on an assessment of training needs and demand.

In response to the increasing interest among member states, WHO is developing a regional strategy for open learning. That work began with an assessment and analysis of training and open-learning needs in the region. The first part of that effort has been completed in the following Pacific Island countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.



The Pacific Consultation on Open Learning for Health Workers was then convened from 16-17 October in Nadi, Fiji. The objectives of the meeting were:

- to review and discuss the findings of the assessment of training and open-learning needs of health workers in the Pacific;
- to exchange experiences, lessons learned and good practices;
- to identify potential open-learning activities for support in the Pacific;
- to recommend components for inclusion in a regional strategy on open learning.

SPC was represented at this meeting by Dr Tom Kiedrzynski, who also served as a WHO temporary adviser.

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