

Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island countries meeting Apia, Samoa, 14–17 March 2005

In 1995 a conference of ministers of health held in Fiji Islands issued the Yanuca Declaration, a statement proposing the vision of “*Healthy Islands*” as the unifying theme for health promotion and health protection in the Pacific. The Healthy Islands ideal was defined as a state where the Pacific Islands were places where:

- children are nurtured in body and mind;
- environments invite learning and leisure;
- people work and age with dignity;
- ecological balance is a source of pride; and
- the ocean, which sustains us, is protected.

The subsequent meetings in Rarotonga in 1997, Koror in 1999, Madang in 2001 and Nuku'alofa in 2003 developed this vision of health in the Pacific Islands in the context of the geographical, social, economic and health features specific to island nations and territories. The vision has been applied to environmental health, noncommunicable and communicable diseases, mental health and human resource management.

The Samoa meeting continued this tradition of exploring ways of strengthening collaboration in the Pacific way, and reviewed progress made in the implementation of the 2003 Tonga commitment to promote healthy lifestyles and supportive environments.

The meeting coined the phrase “one vision, a double burden, three challenges”: namely the Healthy Islands vision, the Pacific’s need to fight against infectious diseases on two fronts — controlling existing infections and guarding against introduction of new ones — and the three challenges of NCDs, CDs and our need to increase training of health workers.

Surveillance and outbreak response

The Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN) featured largely in the discussions. Ministers discussed the PPHSN’s role as an avenue for implementing international health regulations, the regional EpiNet team, and the regional outbreak response fund. Suggestions were made that the regional outbreak response fund, or revolving fund, be included in the Pacific Plan being developed by the Pacific Islands Forum.

In the light of the current spread of avian influenza A (H5N1) in Asia, and the risk of extensive social disruption should there be an influenza pandemic, the importance of putting influenza pandemic preparedness on national agendas was stressed.

Additionally, with regards to the non-communicable disease surveillance, it was reiterated that advantage should be taken of PPHSN, especially regarding surveillance networking and data pooling.

The final version of the recommendations related to PPHSN development will be presented in a later issue of *Inform'ACTION*.

HIV/AIDS

In response to the growing HIV/AIDS threat, ministers recognised the ever-growing need for political commitment, leadership, partnership, collaboration and harmonisation of activities in the area of HIV/AIDS. Prevention still remains a priority. However, there is recognition of the need for a comprehensive approach to treatment, care and support for those people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Since 2003, a Global Fund HIV project has been implemented in

11 countries, focusing on prevention, surveillance, and STI diagnostics. Ministers recognised that a lot more needs to be done to strengthen these areas.

Dengue

Dengue is a major public health problem across the Pacific. Ministers expressed their concerns about the impact that dengue was having in their countries and related their experiences in controlling the disease. New Caledonia described its comprehensive early warning system, which makes use of entomological, virological and meteorological indicators to provide early information on dengue outbreaks. Palau reported on how, by sharing information with other countries via PacNet on the outbreak associated with the regional arts festival, a wider epidemic was probably prevented. Fiji Islands reported on its efforts to strengthen laboratory surveillance and epidemic response. Tonga commented on its current outbreak, and the need for support from WHO and SPC to respond to the epidemic. A proposal was put forward to create a regional dengue initiative, based on the PPHSN network, to work with all Pacific Island countries and territories to strengthen their capacity for dengue prevention and control.

Expanded Programme on Immunization

The Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in the Pacific saves at least 3000 children's lives every year, prevents disability and sickness in tens of thousands more, and has an enormous impact on overall economic development in the Pacific. Some key EPI issues discussed included maintaining "polio free" status, measles elimination and hepatitis B control. The Pacific Hospital Based Active Surveillance (HBAS), developed by WHO in conjunction with SPC as part of the polio eradication activities, offers Pacific nations a sound platform for expanding disease surveillance activities in the Pacific region. The meeting heard that donor and partner coordination is paramount for effective targeting of assistance where it is most needed. There was strong support for the new Pacific Immunization Programme Strengthening (PIPS) initiative, which brings together AusAID, CDC, JICA, NZAID, WHO, UNICEF and SPC/PPHSN under a common EPI agenda.

Migration of skilled health personnel

The loss of skilled health personnel (SHP) through migration has serious implications for the health of Pacific peoples and threatens the Healthy Islands initiatives and health systems performance, including outbreak response. Many strategies for retention of health workers were considered, including: recovering recruitment replacement costs from the countries/agencies that have benefited from the migrant workers, better remuneration, enforcement of bonds and mandatory service requirements, and other country specific solutions and regional cooperation. It was decided that countries need to plan to better manage migration and human resources.

Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN)

The Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN) has established learning centres in ten countries, equipped with computers and training resources and facilities. It provides training of health personnel in basic IT and computer skills, as well as a resource to enable them to undertake health courses and learning through distance education. While ministers expressed concern at the relatively low completion rates by those enrolled in POLHN courses, the POLHN was accepted as a useful learning network for continuing professional education and for IT skills training.

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