

Going back to the Pacific

Report of the Pasifika Medical Association Conference

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"Collective creation of our future; The Plight of the modern Pacifician"
21-24 August, 2005 Nuku'alofa, Kingdom of Tonga

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Representing the University of Otago

Dr Faafetai (Tai) Sopoaga, Xaviour Walker, Shekhar Sehgal, Shivani Shilam, Sina Barrot, Charity Vagai, Luseane Raratabu, Noela Dugu, Vaaiga Autaga-vaia, Emily Giblin, Rachel Dyer, Rachael Wilkinson

In August last year I was fortunate enough to travel with nine other Pacific medical students from the University of Otago to attend the Pasifika Medical Association Conference (PMA) in Tonga.

The PMA was formed in 1996, providing a forum for Pacific doctors, medical students and other allied health professionals. The PMA alternates its conferences between New Zealand and one of the Pacific Island



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countries. This conference attracts health professionals, politicians and leaders from throughout the Pacific to discuss the current issues facing its people in New Zealand and the Pacific.

The Kingdom of Tonga has a population of 112,000 people and is composed of 169 islands, 36 of them inhabited, and is divided into four main island groups – Vava'u, Ha'apai, the Niua and Tongatapu. We stayed on the largest island Tongatapu in the capital Nuku'alofa which is home to His Majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV.

Our visit was in the middle of a civil service strike, which was highly publicised in the New Zealand media. On the NZ news it seemed that the country was in anarchy, though in reality we only saw peaceful sit down protests beside the parliament.

Day 1: Church Service and Conference opening

On the Sunday before the Conference, we attended a church service at the great Saione: Centenary Wesleyan Church. This magnificent church is also His Majesty's church, though unfortunately he was away. We,

however, were treated to the beautiful voices of the Fasi Free Wesleyan Church Choir and going to church in the islands is an experience that everyone should have. The conference was opened by the Honourable Princess Nanasipau'u Tuku'aho and the welcome address by Mr. Viliami Ta'u Tangi, who is the not only the chief surgeon in Tonga, but is also the Minister of Health.

Day 2: Theme: Non Communicable Diseases

Non communicable diseases (NCD) are the leading cause of morbidity amongst the Pacific People. The number one health risk in the Pacific island is obesity. Type 2 diabetes is 3-4 times more common in Pacific Islanders compared to New Zealand Europeans. Pacific people have less knowledge about their disease and are more likely to be receiving sub-optimal treatment.

In the Pacific it has been described as the "double burden" with a decrease in infectious diseases and an increase in NCD. The effects of westernization lifestyle – globalization and urbanization are having a major impact on the Pacific with aggressive marketing from the tobacco, food and motor industry. Confronting the problem has been difficult with the political, financial and geographical barriers. Culture and social acceptance has to be taken in high consideration as food has a high status and is an integral part of hospitality.

We heard from many top researchers, leaders and medical professionals from around the Pacific and New Zealand. The common themes were that there is a need for:

- Long term investments in funding and policies to control NCD,
- social change fundamental for sustainability, and a
- NCD strategic plan.

Many of the Pacific islands are leading the fight against NCD, including the Tongan Ministry of Health who is building a diabetes programme with partnership with the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is spending 60% of their 2006/7 budget on NCD control in the Pacific.

One of the most exciting investments in research is the \$6.5 million Pacific OPIC (Obesity Prevention in Communities) project. This is a collaborative study including Fiji, Tonga, Australia and New Zealand which will be run over 5 years looking at:



- National, Community, Individual levels of obesity,
- multiple strategies (e.g. education, policies, environments, social marketing), and
- all community settings (e.g. villages, churches, schools, sport & recreation, food outlets).

Day 3: Theme: Injury Prevention and Research

Road traffic accidents are a hidden epidemic in the Pacific. This is due to the increase of cars, the need for road infrastructure, lack of legislation with drink driving and seat belt use. In Tonga the number of registered cars had increased by 58% since 2000.

There are economic implications of road traffic injuries including the direct costs involved in hospital admissions, with complicated cases transferred to New Zealand. Considering the limited financial resources available these are costs that restrict money spent in other areas of health. The indirect costs include time off work, or school, and time spent for caregiving by families.

The key to address this neglected problem is prevention through legislation on drink driving, seat belt use and cyclists wearing helmets. There is a need for speed control, road maintenance and planning, strict vehicle inspection and driver licensing with tougher penalties.

Day 4: Oral Health and Mental Health

Oral health is an important and often neglected aspect of health in the Pacific. The cost of training oral health care workers for the Pacific has always been a problem, with previous graduates sent to the Otago Dental School for training at significant costs. In 1993 the Fiji School of Medicine set up a dental school. It was a delight to hear about the successful training of Pacific dentists and oral healthcare workers specific for the Pacific.

One of the most exiting developments in mental health is a WHO report which has a detailed analysis of the mental health needs and resources in Pacific Island countries. This is the preliminary phase in the development of a technical support programme for the organisation of mental health services in countries in the Western Pacific region.

Summary

The opportunity to attend this conference allowed us to hear first hand of the problems currently faced by Pacific health. As doctors in training it was a chance to speak and make contact to our Pacific role models and Pacific health providers. We are extremely grateful for the funding provided by our sponsors which enabled us to attend the conference. Compared to the general New Zealand population, Pacific people have a poorer health status, are exposed risk factors to poor health and experience barriers accessing health services. It is a major credit to these organizations for investing in the future Pacific health professionals.

Information about this year's conference

Pasifika Medical Association of New Zealand: 8th Annual conference

Theme: "Women – Strength of the Pacific"

Dates: 24th-26th August 2006

Venue: Waipuna Hotel & Conference Centre, Mt Wellington, Auckland

Website: www.pacifichealth.org.nz

Contact: pma@pacifichealth.org.nz

Sponsors

Royal College of General Practitioners
 Otago Pacific Peoples Health Trust
 University of Otago School of Medicine

Acknowledgements

Tongan Medical Association
 Pasifika Medical Association
 Presenters and speakers at the PMA conference

