

Introduction

Improving health outcomes in Pacific island countries and areas is a high priority for the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific. Unique health challenges coupled with the demographics of the Pacific – some three million people spread across vast expanses of ocean – require WHO to tailor its support in an effort to improve the health and well-being of Pacific islanders. Since the establishment of the Division of Pacific Technical

Support in Suva, Fiji, in 2010, WHO has increased support to the 21 Pacific island countries and areas.

WHO support is also provided through country offices in Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. WHO technical cooperation is guided by the *WHO Multi-Country Cooperation Strategy for the Pacific 2013–2017* and decisions from the Pacific health ministers meetings.

Strengthening resilience to noncommunicable diseases and climate change

Throughout the Pacific, the proportion of premature deaths due to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) is among the highest in the world, while various communicable diseases still pose a significant burden. Vulnerability to the health impacts of climate change and climate variability, such as the El Niño climate cycle and natural disasters, contributes to increasing health complexities in the Pacific. Health systems are often hampered by limited infrastructure, funding and human resources.

To prevent and control NCDs, multisectoral approaches have been incorporated in revitalized country NCD strategies that use a range of approaches with improved monitoring. WHO has also supported Pacific island countries and areas to improve monitoring against regional and global targets and treaties, such as the *NCD Global Monitoring Framework* and the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The number of tobacco-free homes, schools and communities continues to increase across the Pacific, alongside policy initiatives such as increased taxes and strengthened laws to curb tobacco use.

WHO also provides support to scale up country actions for mental health, with a focus on improving policy, planning and capacity. Through the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP)



In Fiji, more than 500 general practice doctors and nurses were trained in the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme to assess, manage and promote recovery of people with mental disorders.



Climate change will mean more severe extreme weather events, such as cyclones, floods and droughts. The photograph shows coastal erosion following Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015 in Vanuatu.

more than 800 doctors and nurses in 14 Pacific island countries and areas have been trained since 2013. Following the devastation of Cyclone Winston in Fiji in February 2016, aid workers were trained in psychological first aid to improve their capacity to counsel those severely affected by the cyclone.

Pacific island countries and areas face very high risks from extreme weather events, coastal erosion, earthquakes, floods and droughts, some of which are predicted to increase due to climate change. Cyclones and flooding raise the risk of outbreaks of climate-sensitive and water-related diseases, including vector-borne and diarrhoeal diseases, typhoid fever and leptospirosis. In addition, overcrowding among displaced populations

creates conditions suitable for the spread of respiratory tract infections and vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles. In 2016, work began on a five-year project to build climate-resilient health systems through strengthened governance and policies, early warning systems, and preventive and curative service delivery within the framework of a successful pilot programme on climate change adaptation to protect human health.

Immunization coverage has been maintained at high levels in most Pacific island countries and areas. Six countries have reached the target of less than 1% prevalence of hepatitis B virus in children under 5 years of age. WHO support continues in tackling the emergence of MDR-TB, continuing the strong progress towards

the elimination of lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, soil-transmitted helminths and yaws, and the prevention and control of HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

Three countries – Cook Islands, Niue, and Vanuatu – reached the global target and were officially acknowledged by the WHO Director-General in May 2016 as having achieved elimination of lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem.

Strengthening frameworks and looking to the future

WHO has supported the development and review of national health policies, strategies and plans in several Pacific island countries and areas. Support also was provided to review national medi-

cines, blood safety and laboratory regulations to ensure access to safe, quality services in Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga. In an effort to advance universal health coverage (UHC) and the Pacific vision of Healthy Islands, WHO has worked with Pacific island countries to improve the delivery of essential services by focusing on primary health care and community health. To help integrate foreign-trained medical graduates, WHO in collaboration with the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Fiji National University (FNU) provided technical guidance to set up an internship programme and develop national human resources plans in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

In working towards UHC in the Pacific, WHO will continue to address five priority areas: 1) the escalation of NCDs and associated disabilities; 2) the continuing challenges of communicable diseases, including neglected tropical diseases; 3) the unfinished Millennium Development Goals agenda, focusing on water, sanitation, and maternal and child health, as well as the health targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda; 4) high vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change; and 5) limited health infrastructure, as well as limited human, material and financial resources. ■

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a global public health threat that compromises the effectiveness of antibiotics, with many infectious diseases at risk of becoming untreatable. Fiji has taken a leading role by developing a national AMR action plan.

