Introduction

Enhancing healthy and resilient Pacific islands

The WHO Division of Pacific Technical Support was established in 2010 to deal with the specialized health challenges of the Pacific, including the double burden of disease and climate change. With offices in Fiji, Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, the Division coordinates support tailored to Pacific island countries and areas (PICs).

The Pacific islands experience specific challenges due to small populations and geographical remoteness. Specialized services typically require high population numbers to be efficient and cost-effective, which means they are often not available in the Pacific islands. Drugs and other needed products are also often high-priced imports. Smart solutions are required to overcome these “built-in” obstacles for health systems in the Pacific.
Strengthening health systems and primary care is embedded in the Healthy Islands vision set out in 1995. The vision has guided the policies of PICs over the past 20 years, as well as the support from WHO and other development partners.

WHO defines health security as “the reduced vulnerability of populations to acute threats to health” through collective international action. Health is a major concern in nearly all emergencies. People have high expectations for health systems to respond quickly and effectively in emergencies while remaining fully functional.

Readiness to respond to and recover from health crises requires strong national health systems, and partnerships for regional and global collective action for health security. Key achievements in this area include the endorsement of the Pacific Health Security Coordination Plan 2017–2022, with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of New Zealand.

WHO also stands ready to respond to emergencies in the Pacific through technical collaboration and field operations. With WHO support, National Emergency Medical Teams in four PICs have strengthened readiness to respond in crises and preparedness to receive and employ international teams.

As of January 2018, 12 PICs have reached and sustained high routine immunization coverage of over 90%, in line with goals for the Decade of Vaccines 2011–2020. WHO in the Pacific has worked closely with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to train Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) managers to improve the quality of data behind these statistics.

PICs as a bloc are likely to have achieved the regional measles elimination goal. This conclusion is based on the discarded non-measles rates in 2016 and 2017, which exceed the expected rates for monitoring, and the fact that no measles outbreaks have occurred in the Pacific since 2015.

Similarly, hepatitis B control is progressing through immunization, with eight PICs verified, and four now ready to be verified as having achieved the disease control goal.

Over the past year, the Division has continued to support the rollout of testing and treatment guidelines for HIV, sexually transmitted infections and hepatitis, including their inclusion in the development of national action plans, training of trainers and surveillance activities.

Prevention, care and control measures continue to be on strong footing, with the burden of tuberculosis (TB) trending downward in PICs. Multidrug-resistant TB and TB/HIV burden is low and has been well managed. WHO coordinated the establishment of a Pacific TB laboratory network as additional support for culture and drug sensitivity testing and a second-line TB drug stockpile for PICs.

Efforts to increase access to health services for women, newborn babies, children and adolescents have continued with the United Nations Joint Programme on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Policy dialogue was concluded on the adaptation and implementation of the new WHO global guidelines and recommendations on RMNCAH in the three countries, with WHO providing support for programme implementation.

Out of 15 countries endemic for lymphatic filariasis, five (Cook Islands, the Marshall Islands, Niue, Tonga and Vanuatu) were acknowledged by WHO in 2016–2017 as having eliminated the disease as a public health problem.

Support for improved disease management using the WHO Package of Essential Noncommunicable (PEN) Disease Interventions for Primary Health Care in Low-Resource Settings included subregional and national capacity-building workshops, with a focus on monitoring. Meanwhile, the fifth Pacific Islands Mental Health Network (PIMHNet) meeting focused on emergencies and mental health resilience. In the wake of Tropical Cyclone Gita, post-disaster support was also provided to Kiribati in March.

In 2017, partnerships for tobacco control also increased, as agreements were signed with the Oceania Customs Organisation and the South Pacific Tourism Organisation.

Health leaders in the Pacific welcomed the WHO special initiative on climate change and health in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The initiative is a collaboration with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, for which Fiji presided over its 23rd annual Conference of the Parties. Developing and nurturing resilient health systems is central to addressing the health impacts of climate change. In March, the plan of action to implement the SIDS initiative in PICs was developed. The Pacific action plan will feed into the global initiative, joining forces with SIDS around the world to produce a global plan of action.■