

On Testifying at Senate Confirmation Hearings for a New Minister of Health for Palau – Where are we going in health?

Honorable Senators,

I am truly honored to be invited to be here today at this public hearing regarding the Minister of Health. Let me begin by stating my representation today. I am here as Palauan citizen and a voter, and I voted for some of you. I am also here as the first American Board Certified Palauan physician to return to work in Palau and a colleague of Dr. Victor Yano. Lastly, I am here today as the Director of Bureau of Public Health within the Ministry of Health for which, I have been working ever since returning to Palau. I am here today, because I was requested by the Honorable Senator Caleb Otto, Chairman, Committee on Health and Education.

First let me frankly share my thoughts about Dr. Victor M. Yano so that the rest of my statement are clearly framed and NOT be misrepresented. It is my belief that Dr. Yano is one of the most intelligent Palauans that I have had the privilege to know and work with. I have worked with him as a medical student and as staff physician of the Ministry of Health. I truly respect Dr. Yano and believe that he is one of the rare jewels that Palau must acknowledge. It is my most sincere belief that the legacy of Dr. Yano in health in Palau will not be that he became the Minister of Health, but that in the middle of "medical chaos" in Palau, he went into private practice in Palau in the 1980s. By having gone into private practice, he elevated the expectations of the Palauan people to expect a higher level of health care. This affected how the Ministry of Health would provide care because of the elevated expectations of the community. The Ministry of Health at this time is providing a much higher level of care now than it did more than 20 years ago. It is because of these feelings, I choose not to discuss Dr. Victor Yano but rather dwell with position of the Minister of Health.

Instead, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today and wonder if this exercise is one of futility. I think the politics of the Senate is clear and to discuss this issue will not change the ultimate outcome. Therefore, I prefer to dwell on the process of choosing who shall be Minister of Health. If indeed the opinions of those working in health are important, then it should have been accessed prior to the nomination. The questions are: What are the guidelines or requirement for choosing a Minister of Health? What is the direction for health in Palau that would require such guidelines? With such

direction, what qualities of the Minister of Health are needed to clarify and operationalize such direction? To operationalize that direction, what funding mechanism is there to do it? For example, we are all aware of what our Primary, Community and Public Health have done for our country. We have 97% access to primary care, 100% immunization rate at school entry, 0 maternal mortality in the last 10 years, an infant mortality rate of 12, increasing life expectancy at birth, and we have reached all 4,376 households in Palau interviewing 15,177 people (79% of the population) in Palau with our community survey. We also continue to bring the highest affordable health care services to the lowest access point in Palau and these are our efforts to bring health back to the people of Palau. Sadly, most of these are paid for by U.S. Federal Domestic Grants, because as a nation we still pay more attention to Tertiary Care (Medical Referral and Hemodialysis). As a matter of fact, last year we spent more local funds for off-island medical referral (150 patients) and hemodialysis (30 patients) than we did for the whole Bureau of Public Health. Is this the direction of health in Palau? If it is, then you must reassess your long terms aspirations for health in Palau.

I think the issue is not whether Dr. Yano is qualified rather, the issue is what does the leadership want done and what are we as a county trying to achieve in health?

If not, Dr. Yano will not solve these issues, it is the leadership of Palau who must clarify the vision, point the direction, select the model of health care then make the right capital and fiscal investments.

I think the issue is not whether Dr. Yano is qualified rather, the issue is what does the leadership want done and what are we as a county trying to achieve in health? Because when the "road map" is cleared, then and only then, can we make a truly an appropriate choice. Choosing Dr. Yano is an easy task but truly owning up to the direction of health in Palau is much more difficult and that is why the approval process was given to you, the Senators. I thank you for the invitation to be here and will look forward to your ultimate decision.

Thank your very much.

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