

Guest Editorial

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Sexuality is often discussed subtly in the Pacific but its practice cannot be kept a secret. The introduction of HIV/AIDS has forced the people of the region to re-examine this situation. The reaction varies from advocates of public debates, lectures, media blitzes, discussions in the homes, and sex education in schools to outright taboo and suppression of the topic. So much emotion has been generated that this issue of Pacific Health Dialog (PHD) is a timely intervention bringing some rationality into the debate.

This PHD has brought together the facts and the views about AIDS/STD and sexuality in the Pacific. It is the first document of its kind exclusively about the Pacific. The South Pacific Commission is proud to be the leading agency for the production of the issue. Facts and emotions have to be discussed together in this issue of PHD because they are inseparable when discussing matters of sex, sexuality and sexual health. In fact, sex organs, reproductive health and related problems have to be part of this issue to be complete.

The Original Papers examine the epidemiology and health services relating to AIDS/STD. Even though Sarda *et al* indicate a low number of cases they made the point that the rates are under-reported and of significant magnitude, globally. They indicated the deficiencies in the health services and the need to address these. Ahlburg *et al* made a very conservative estimate of the cost for the case of an AIDS patient. However, this very conservative estimate is still at least 14000% more than the US\$20 to US\$50 per capita health expenditure in Pacific countries. That is, to care for one AIDS patient in one year, the health care allocation for about 175 to 200 people for that year will be used up!

Karel, Schultz, and Durand look at sexual knowledge and behaviour in three Pacific populations. The problem is blatant but the solution is still forthcoming. Child abuse, especially sexual abuse, is rearing under cover and a Pacifically appropriate approach is urgently needed. Much work remains to



be done to improve knowledge on sexuality and to bridge the gap between cultural taboo and the obvious over practice indicated by the high rates of STD, population growth, prostitution, and extra-marital intercourse. The apparent increase of homosexuality, child abuse, rape and domestic violence are worrying indicators. Many of the country profiles in the PHD raises the issues of insufficient resources, cultural constraints, legal inadequacies and limited political will to address sex-related problems at all levels of Pacific societies. What is needed to look under the Pacific false modesty hindering factual knowledge?

In 1990, Kuruisaqila, Finau and Helu-Thaman presented a paper each to the Thirtieth South Pacific Conference. They examined the different dimensions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Interestingly enough, five years later we have progressed very little in our understanding of those issues but the debates have got louder. Many more people are now in the debate including lawyers, economists, church leaders, academics, demographers, sex workers and journalists. The arena is not exclusively for health workers anymore. This is to be commented for sexuality is a multi-dimensional socio-economic matter not just a health issue. However, the time has come for action. Vete, Sheehan, and Duve and Samuel make some suggestions but more is needed.

Rakaseta and Duncan provide scenarios of AIDS/STD encompassing the Pacific as is happening in Asia and Africa. Vete laments the myths that threaten sexual health in the region. The Reviews allow an examination of important issues of current sexual activities in the Pacific, e.g. HIV transmission in dental practice, women issues and human rights. These reviews put many of the other contributions in context and globally.

Some interesting news of development and other health activities in the Pacific are included. The letters to editor and the news item are worthwhile quick reads. The usual journal abstracts highlight the available papers on HIV/AIDS relevant to and about the Pacific. This section is of special interest and needs people to send in articles so that it can be more comprehensive. These very short pieces should raise interests for developing them further in future PHD issues.

A special paper from Dever and Finau highlights a Pacific milestone — a ministerial declaration on health. Thanks to WHO and the Government of Fiji, the Yanuca Declaration has come into being. This is an exciting initiative which the South Pacific Commission would like to continue. The impact of this declaration is at the national level but regional organisations must facilitate its implementation. The process to the

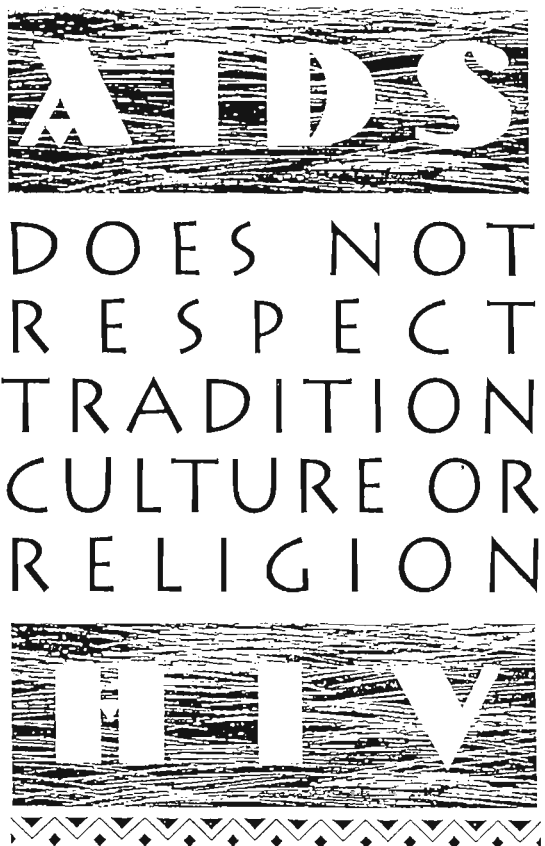
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Yanuca Declaration and its content have to be on the development agenda of the Pacific in the twenty-first century. The Pacific must be serious about social development and the Yanuca Declaration is an integral part of the pathway to achieving this the Pacific way.

The issue raised by the Yanuca Declaration and the papers on AIDS/STD and sexuality need a Pacific consensus. Dialogue is essential for meaningful and appropriate action. Many of the issues may be well understood but the will and resources to act seem to be in abeyance. The seriousness and severity of the present situation calls on all Pacificans and their

friends to bring about drastic re-examination of our culture, values and economic development. Prominent among the issues are the AIDS/STD threat and the sexuality debate. The poles of the debate on these prominent issues are the questions: *Should society change for sex? or Should sex change for society?*

This issue of Pacific Health Dialog has certainly provided the basis for questions to initiate rethinking, discussions and directions for action. □



“The global AIDS epidemic recognises neither borders nor political ideologies. It respects no nationality and no race or creed - yet it has the potential to touch the lives of every person in the world.”

Paul Keating, Prime Minister, Australia