
A Guest Editorial Perspective

Looking back to the Future:

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I join the Editorial Board of this issue of the *Pacific Health Dialog* (PHD) to make this issue available to you for information and for your use in your own work. This issue focuses on the contemporary health issues facing the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). The articles in this issue cover a range of topics from historical accounts of known diseases (Fr. Hezel's article) to trends in health expenditures, trends in the most common forms of chronic diseases or non-communicable disease (NCDs), disease outbreaks and response, institutional response to the re-emerging and emerging of problems associated with human resource for health, use of information communication technology (ICT) to the strive of improving exchange and utilization of health information in a geographically scattered island setting, and other interesting topics.

I begin with the issue of human resources for health. If it is not already obvious, let it be known that FSM is in a crisis. Beginning in 2000, each state started to feel a drop in its nursing personnel. Each year from that time, about 10 nurses have retired because of age; several more have died. If we continue on this rate, at least 100 members of the existing workforce will have to retire by the year 2020. And out of the new entrants of students into nursing school each year, about only four (4) students graduate and join the nursing field each year. This will replace only 40% of the expected shortage of nursing; the 60% will have to come from somewhere.

This picture is even worse for the other critical workforce sectors such as doctors and allied health professionals (laboratory, diagnostic specialists, pharmacists, and biomedical engineers). To my knowledge, less than a handful of students are in their academic preparation for these professions, and based on statistics, we will be very fortunate if all of these few students successfully complete these training.

So where do we go from here?

Someone once said, "When your students come to Fiji School of Medicine or any college or university in the South, they are at least two years behind their counterparts in their level of academic preparation". Of course there are always outliers from the norm, but the statement above seems to be the prevailing reason for why students from the FSM don't do well in health related fields as compared to students from other countries in the South, the USA, the Philippines, and others. Somewhere along their educational preparation for college, the system fails them. Our own College of Micronesia-FSM can attest to this challenge as they



have been grappling with this by creating remedial programs for the students who could not pass their entrance requirements.

The long-term solution may lie in the need to improve the quality of education provided to students starting from elementary years. Research has shown that 75% of learning takes place early in a person's life; the rest is just an application of what one has learned early on in life. Why not apply this evidence in our education curriculum, coupled by creating opportunities for parents to take a more active role in their children's learning?

The local colleges such as the College of Micronesia-FSM, Palau Community College, and the College of the Marshall Islands have started to respond to this need by creating accredited nursing programs. While the FSM has not fully stepped up to the plate like the RMI and Palau, it has embarked on a public health training program which has received full accreditation. All of these programs will not only respond to the region's need to improve its workforce, but will also provide an added value to increase the number of prospects academically prepared to seek health related field as their career in the future. This undertaking is commendable and should be sustained, so that each of these countries can have students who have been exposed to health careers to increase their chances of being successful when they enroll in higher learning institutions. This is a noble cause and only time can tell if this goal is met or not.

With respect to the other health subjects, you will notice that the healthcare spending per capita for the FSM has increased substantially over the years. However, the trend of diseases and mortality has also increased in those years. The reasons are multi-factorial, and to mention a few, due mainly to shift in lifestyle habits, inadequate health education, inaccessibility to basic health services, inadequate health manpower resources and health facilities as well as certain imbedded cultural beliefs that to some extent affect the health-seeking behavior of the island people.

There is evidence to suggest that other Pacific Island countries are able to improve their health status outcome indicators with less than the amount of money FSM is spending. While this observation is a subject for debate, it at least raises a question as to whether or not the way we have been doing business should be revisited.

I also want to acknowledge the fact that a few of our own health professionals and associates in the FSM have become "scientists" in their own merit. In the past, when there was a disease outbreak, outside experts are immediately dispatched into the FSM to conduct the investigation and command response. You will see in some of the articles that while we continue to have disease outbreaks, our own people are becoming more inquisitive and able to delve into the epidemiology of the disease to control further spread. This is an area where we will continue to need assistance, as evidenced by the arrangement we have with WHO for an in-house medical epidemiologist (Dr. Boris Pavlin), but the fact that our own health personnel are now able to take on this task is promising. As we mature I am sure our young scientists and inquirers will find the means to make their work available to the wider readership in the Pacific and beyond.

An area that has "re-emerged" in the FSM, in my opinion, is the role of the NGO in promoting health either at the community level or in contributing to research at the global level. For example, the excellent work



done by the Island Food Community of Pohnpei in the FSM is an example. One of the articles in this issue documents their involvement in a global health study on traditional food systems, and how the results of a two-year intervention promoting local foods show significant dietary improvements. Associated with this project is the “go local” effort dedicated to the concept of promoting local produce high in resistant starch and fiber, which has important implications for diabetes control.

Similarly, other NGOs in the FSM have started to take on active role in educating the public about HIV/AIDs, diabetes, cancer, TB and other public health concerns unique to the community in which they operate. To name a few, Micronesian Seminar (<http://www.micsem.org>), Micronesia Human Resource Development Center, Micronesian Red Cross Society, and the various women councils in each of the states of Chuuk, Pohnpei, Yap and Kosrae, continue to promote health and increase public awareness on important health issues. These NGOs are sometimes more effective than the government in promoting health and raising public awareness and it will be unwise if we don't strengthen their capacity to be our allies in the battle against disease.

Lastly, I want to thank the members of the editorial board for dedicating their time to make this issue come to press. This is the first time that the FSM has spearheaded a peer-reviewed journal with collaboration of individuals who live and work in the FSM. Publication of this issue would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of these individuals who volunteered their own time for this cause, along with the authors who see the value of writing the articles in this issue. I cannot thank them enough for writing a new chapter in the health of our nation. They deserve a lot more than I can say in this piece.

Sincerely,



*“If you educate a man you educate a person,
but if you educate a woman you educate a family.”*

Ruby Manikan

