

The Hawaii / Pacific Basin AHEC – training the health workforce in select medically underserved areas of the Pacific

Kelley Withy*

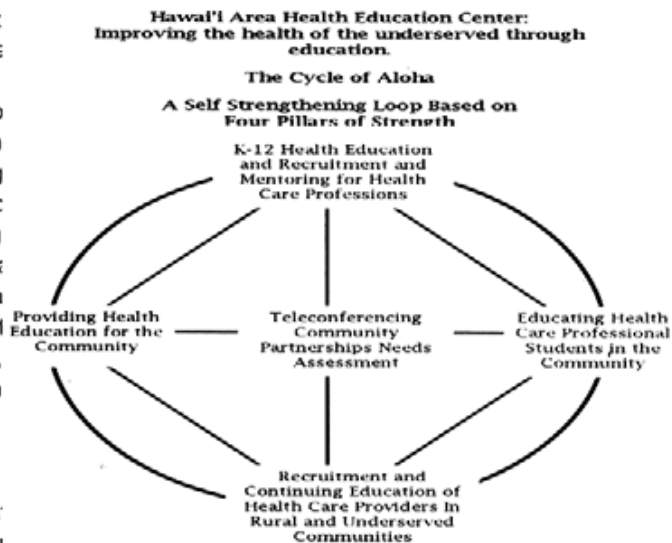
*Executive Director, Hawaii / Pacific Basin AHEC, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii; Associate Professor, Department of Family Practice and Community Health, JABSOM. Contact: Kelley Withy, M.D., Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC, JABSOM, 1960 East West Road, Honolulu, HI 96822; withyk@hawaii.rr.com.

AHEC stands for Area Health Education Center (AHEC). It is a United States Department of Health and Human Services program funded by Title VII of federal legislature that was introduced in 1972 as one branch of the health safety net program that includes community health centers and National Service corps. AHEC was designed as the arm of the triad, and therefore is funded through Health Resources and Services Administration of Health Professions. The national program aims to improve the supply, distribution, diversity and quality of the health workforce, ultimately increasing access to health care in medically underserved areas. In a typical year, the federal AHEC funds support train 32,000 health professions students in community sites, recruitment activities for 25,000 students, in health careers recruitment to 6,000 teachers and counselors and provide continuing education to health care providers¹.

Currently, there are AHEC programs in 45 states and over 120 centers in rural and underserved communities in the United States¹. The first AHEC center outside of the United States is the Palau AHEC in Koror, Republic of Palau, which opened in 2001. Each program works with communities to establish local centers that can train health professionals and students in culturally appropriate medical and public health skills. These centers link the resources of university health science centers with local planning, educational and clinical resources in order to develop multidisciplinary training and improve health care delivery in medically underserved areas.

The University Of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) AHEC Program began in 1995 with a center in Hilo, Hawaii. A second center was opened on Kauai 2 years later. For the first five years of existence, the AHEC grant in Hawaii was administered by the private nonprofit Ke Ola O Hawaii. In 2000, the Hawaii AHEC program underwent reorganization and is

now administered from within the medical school. At that time, the mission statement was created: To improve the health of the people of Hawaii through education. The activities of the Hawaii AHEC were identified and categorized into 5 areas described in Table 1 and represented in the Cycle of Aloha (figure 1):



Later in 2000, as the Hawaii AHEC was preparing the renewal grant application, JABSOM was approached by the Republic of Palau (through its emissary Dr. Gregory Dever) to include a center that would collaborate with the Palau Ministry of Health (MOH) and Palau Community College to provide primary care and public health residency training for regionally trained medical officers, graduates of the Pacific Basin Medical Officer Training Program in Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia².

In 2001, the Palau AHEC was funded, and the Hawaii AHEC program became the Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC^{3,4} (see Table 1). Clinical supervision began through the Palau Community Health Center and its peripheral dispensaries. The AHEC participants took diploma courses from University of Auckland Faculty

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of Health Sciences and later through the Fiji School of Medicine School of Public health and primary care. Through partnerships with the Fiji School of Public Health and Primary Care, the public health and primary care training offered in Koror expanded to include public health training for nurses and other healthcare providers utilizing both face to face and distance learning

methodologies. Specific successes of the Palau AHEC center include diploma in country training in General Practice (Auckland) and Public Health (Fiji) for 11 medical officer physicians, undergraduate Certificate and Diploma training in Public Health for 128 nurses, public health administrators, and environmental health workers. Collaborative AHEC activities include MOH pharmacy technician training for 9 individuals⁵, MOH laboratory technician training for 10 individuals⁶, disaster preparedness training (CDC's PEHI) for more than 100 emergency workers, two of whom are now trained to be first responder trainers⁷. In addition, a countrywide door-to-door health survey of all 4,370 households in Palau was designed by the AHEC residents and performed by the community health nurses that is likely to impact medical care decisions in the Republic of Palau⁸.

The interest in AHECs in the Pacific has expanded, and the newest AHEC renewal was just funded to include AHEC Centers to open in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Yap, Federated States of Micronesia. The CNMI AHEC center will focus efforts on health careers recruitment and expanding regional nursing and allied health training. The Yap AHEC will concentrate on providing associate level training for health aids and public health training for nurses and other health professionals. It is our hope that these activities will strengthen the health infrastructure of the Pacific Basin and expand the reach of health career recruitment and retention programs.

To find out more about AHEC in Hawaii and the Pacific Basin please contact the center directors (see Table 2), or visit the Hawaii/Pacific Basin web page at www.ahec.hawaii.edu.

Table 1. Activities of Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC

1. Recruitment to health and science careers	Student recruitment activities such as the Summer Health Academy and Health Occupations Club on Kauai the Program of Masters on Molokai; recruitment visits to schools across the region; field trips for students to visit research laboratories and academic institutions.
2. Community based education for health professions students	Training of health professions students in rural and underserved communities; interdisciplinary community based training; Primary Care and Public Health Training for Medical Officer Physicians in Palau.
3. Recruitment and retention of providers to and in rural areas	AHEC advertises medical positions and posts resumes on the AHEC web page and performs an annual health workforce assessment (http://www.ahec.hawaii.edu/job.htm). Continuing education events are also supported by AHEC and a general listing of opportunities listed at http://www.ahec.hawaii.edu/cme.htm .
4. Community based health education	Peer to peer health education sessions using distance-learning modalities are performed from and to rural areas of Hawaii and the Republic of the Marshall Islands using video teleconferencing. AHEC helps fund community learning centers across the region such as the Ka`u Learning Resource Center to provide health programs for community members.
5. Communication and Collaboration	Broad based collaboration and leveraging of resources is the key to AHEC success. For educational purposes, AHEC has developed a system of video teleconferencing units that individuals with which individuals can participate in health education or other health related activities. See http://www.ahec.hawaii.edu/vtc.htm for a listing of all VTC sites identified in Hawaii and description of access from each site.

Table 2. Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC Centers and contact information

AHEC Center	Director	Contact information
Ke Anuenue AHEC, Hilo, HI	Ms. Deedri Veehala	dveehala@hawaii.rr.com
Na Lei Wili AHEC		
Palau AHEC	Dr. Gregory Dever	gdever@palaunet.com
CNMI AHEC	Dr. Faye F. Untalan	funtalan@hawaii.edu
Maui County AHEC	To be hired	
Yap AHEC	Dr. Mark Durand	durand@mail.fm
Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC Program Office www.ahec.hawaii.edu	Dr. Kelley Withy.	808-956-9761 withyk@hawaii.rr.com

References

- 1 Health Resources and Services web page: <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/ahec/>, accessed 10/6/04.
- 2 Dever G, Finau SA, Hunton R. The Pacific medical education model: introducing the process of innovation. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 1997; 4(2): 177-190.
- 3 Dever G, Finau SA, McCormick R. In-country and community-based postgraduate family practice training for Micronesian physicians – the Palau AHEC: a collaborative effort. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 2002; 9(1): 141-145.
- 4 Withy K, Dever G. Building Partnerships to meet public health needs in the Pacific. *The National AHEC Bulletin*, 2002; XIX(1): 44-46.
- 5 The Palau AHEC has assisted the Palau MOH in working with the University of Hawaii at Hilo Pharmacy Technician Training Program. Other Pharmacy Technician Training partners include Pacific Resources for Education & Learning and the University of Alaska, which developed the Pharmacy Technician Training curriculum.
- 6 Funded by a Hospital Preparedness Bioterrorism Cooperative Agreement from Health Resources & Services Administration, the medical laboratory technician training was organized by the MOH and the Palau AHEC.
- 7 The Palau AHEC is the coordinating body at Palau Community College for the PCC Pacific Center for Emergency Health which collaborates with PCC's School of Continuing Education to locally organize the CDC Pacific Emergency Health Initiative's in-country activities for First Responder and Mass Casualty Training, Hospital Preparedness Operations Planning, and Public Health Operations Planning. The Center is partially supported by CDC funding. See related article this issue by D. Rykken: *Report: Palau's current and future capacity for disaster management*.
- 8 See related article this issue by Dever et al: The Palau AHEC - academizing the public health work plan: capacity development and innovation in Micronesia. *Pacific Health Dialog* 2004; 2 (1): 20-30

We are drowning in information and starving for knowledge
(Rutherford D Rogers)