

Training and Coordination for Pacific Island Health Services: The Problem of Distance and the Peacesat Program

When health workers in the Pacific islands north of the equator need to hold an important meeting or workshop they pick a place, prepare travel authorizations, get on planes, stay up all night in transit lounges, rent cars and hotel rooms at their destination, finally sit down together in a meeting room to conduct their business then repeat the process in reverse back to their homes. The monopoly prices that the regional governments pay for their airline tickets and per diem costs put big dents in limited budgets. The large blocks of time spent in travel by health workers deprive their home islands of essential skills and add to the disorganization of health services.

Peacesat, a dedicated satellite communications network for use by Pacific island jurisdictions, was intended to solve this problem by providing free real-time video and audio conferencing links throughout the region. The Peacesat network consists of a retired weather satellite, donated compliments of the US government, a headquarters and base station in Hawaii, and a consortium of Pacific island jurisdictions, each having from one to several ground stations.

Its headquarters and a few of the ground stations are staffed by experts who have worked for years on the project. In contrast, most of the ground stations are staffed by local government employees who are trained on the job, paid low salaries and move on to other positions before long.

On any given day, throughout most of the system, scheduled conferences fail. Sometimes the connection doesn't go through at all. Sometimes it is the audio that doesn't work and sometimes it is the video. Sometimes a station can only transmit and other times it can only receive. Sometimes everything works fine at the start of a meeting then some glitch comes along that curtails the session within 20 or 30 minutes. Once in a while the system works perfectly throughout the entire scheduled session. One even hears reports of a base station here or there which has enjoyed a fortunate confluence of factors that result in fairly reliable performance over periods of a year or two. The failures are variously

ascribed to limitations in the satellite's broadcast coverage "footprint", sunspot activity, difficulty obtaining needed spare parts for the aging system hardware, temporary malfunction of the mechanism that aims the receiving antennae, ground station operator error, electrical interference and an unfavorable position of the moon at certain times of the year. Whatever the cause of failure, the participants who show up for a session typically sit around for an hour or two while station operators make adjustments, call in supervisors for help and ask for advice from Hawaii. More often than not, participants finally leave without having completed the session.

Peacesat is funded year-to-year primarily through grants from the U.S. government. Over the years, millions of dollars have been spent. The Hawaii base station staff has organized countless site visits, training workshops, ground station software and hardware updates, and changes to the satellite aimed at improving the performance of the system. The base station staff are passionate, top-flight professionals who appear to have mastered the technical

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The jurisdictions of the region are fortunate to receive donations of hospitals, equipment, medicines and supplies from more affluent countries. Usually, these donations are a blessing. When a donated item is inappropriate or doesn't work as intended, however, it can cause harm by raising unrealistic expectations, diverting scarce human and material resources, and adding to the cumulative burden of dysfunction that developing countries already experience. In these cases, the best course can be to gracefully decline the item and politely request help in obtaining a more appropriate alternative.

The hope of establishing video conferencing capability is not unrealistic. When an earthquake hits Azerbaijan or

an upheaval occurs in Rwanda it takes only a few days for CNN to establish live audio/video conversations between news anchors and their on-site reporters. The Peacesat satellite was judged to no longer be up to the task of supporting weather monitoring and so was replaced and passed on by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It should be no surprise that this satellite is not up to the task of supporting the health and educational aspirations

of a region. After more than 20 years of efforts to make Peacesat work, it is time to acknowledge that it will, in all likelihood, never provide the reliable video conferencing capability that is so desperately needed. It is time to give thanks for the extraordinary service and endurance of the Peacesat professionals. It is time to stop pouring resources into Peacesat and ask whether help might be given instead for a system that will really work.

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You see things; and you say "Why?" But I dream of things that never were;
and I say "Why not?"

George Bernard Shaw - 1856 - 1950)