

Status of Public Health in the Republic of Palau

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Abstract: *In terms of Public Health, the people of Palau can be said to enjoy quite good health and are blessed with relatively good medical facilities. Over the years, the trend we have been following it to "bring health to the community" by building the community health centers with ownership held by stakeholders in the respective locations. Palau's isolation with scattered islands over a vast area of ocean makes it imperative to establish these community health centers in order to bring health closer to the people.*

Like most developing nations, Palau has its health challenges. We have also seen that attention must also be directed at animal health. In Palau we have also focused much attention on emergency health, and have taken steps to set up a viable emergency health response. It has been said that "there is no health without mental health." Development of adequate human resources in medicine, public health, nursing, and allied health is a major challenge for Palau. A policy we have adopted is to conduct our own training programs where high school graduates are recruited to take such training that prepares them for entry level into nursing and allied health. Once gaining entry into a chosen field, we attempt to place promising students at medical, health or nursing schools locally and abroad where Palauan students may train and return home to serve our health needs. Palau has only one 80-bed, government-owned, modest hospital to serve its population of 20,000. With the changing health environment and changing needs, we find the hospital increasingly becoming small. As a small developing country, Palau has limited medical equipment for basic medical care. Through much assistance from the World Health Organization, we have benefited immensely with training and many other useful programs and information about health. We continue to believe firmly that public health crosses all boundaries and respects no politics, and people should no longer be neglected or ignored where health is at issue! I hope by contributing to this issue of Pacific Health Dialog, Palau can reach all our friends, especially the Pacificans. (PHD, 2005 Vol 12 No 1 Pages 11 - 13)

Introduction

Greetings from the people of Palau! The Republic of Palau is a small island country which gained its independence from the United States only ten years ago. The Republic of Palau is comprised of more than 200 islands which form an archipelago in the western Pacific, with a total land mass of 170.4 square miles, and a population of approximately 20,000 as of 2000.

In terms of Public Health, the people of Palau can be said to enjoy quite good health and are blessed with relatively good medical facilities. We have a 12-year old, 80-bed hospital with a little more than twenty physicians and two private medical clinics, two private eye clinics, one private dental clinic, and one private pharmacy. In the past eight years, with assistance from United States federal programs, we have established four super-dispensaries or community health centers in strategic locations around the islands. Over the years, the trend we have been following it to "bring health to the community" by building the community health centers with ownership held by stakeholders in the respective

locations. Palau's isolation with scattered islands over a vast area of ocean makes it imperative to establish these community health centers in order to bring health closer to the people.

In support of this trend, we have taken a more proactive approach to health by going out to the community and taken a comprehensive community assessment which has enabled us at the Ministry of Health to take an overview of the health factors and indicators within the community. The data collected from this assessment are already computerized and available to give guidance to the Ministry in formulating policies to address the health care needs of the people served.

As I indicated earlier, the people of Palau enjoy relatively good health as can be seen from some of our public health indicators. Immunization rates for infants to two years of age are at 97 percent and 100 percent at school entry; maternal mortality rate has been zero for more than the last ten years; and child mortality has gone down to one digit. Even the average life span has been extended two years over the last decade. The leading causes of death are: heart attacks, strokes, cancer, renal problems, accidental injuries, and suicides. Much of these are preventable causes and it becomes a challenge for us to develop policies and programs in primary health designed to prevent these diseases.

Like most developing nations, Palau has its health challenges. First, we still have our challenges with communicable diseases; but in our stage of development

and nationhood, we are increasingly challenged with non-communicable diseases so often associated with industrialized, developed countries. With Westernization and the so-called modernization have come changes in our lifestyles, our environment, our diets, and so on. We have our problems with obesity, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, renal failures and hemo-dialysis, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS against which Palau, a small beautiful place, is not immune either. We are doing much work in public education and social marketing to empower the people with knowledge of how to take care of them selves so that they can stay healthy and stay out of the hospital.

Cognizant of the fact that many communicable diseases are also environmentally connected, we have focused much attention at environmental health and have found this effort highly effective. During the hosting of the Ninth Festival of Pacific Arts in Palau in July 2005, our efforts directed at environmental health through training and licensing of food handlers, active surveillance, and quick response to threats helped to stave off dengue fever and food poisoning. This exercise taught us an important lesson that taking care to ensure a healthy environment contributes to good health all around.

We have also seen that attention must also be directed at animal health. In the past few years, we have seen cases where animal-borne diseases like leptospirosis have transferred to humans. There are the well-known cases of SARS and avian flu threatening the Pacific. All these indicate that we need to pay attention to animal health, particularly as it poses threats to human health. In Palau we have also focused much attention on emergency health, and have taken steps to set up a viable emergency health response. Such response was first put to test during the Ninth Festival of Pacific Arts in Palau, and while we were pleased with the outcome, we know that our emergency health plan needs further improvement to ensure that when disasters strike, natural or man-made, we would be in a strategic position to put our limited resources into maximum utilization to ensure safety of all people affected.

The majority of illness and diseases are seen and treated by our medical staff; the more acute illnesses which require more than tertiary care are referred off island to nearby Philippines or to Honolulu, Hawaii for treatment at more advanced medical centers. This practice is fine as Palau is not able to afford, nor is it practical, to establish such medical facilities in Palau. However, the cost of medical referral is increasing every

year, and we are struggling with spiraling costs within a limited economy. We need to develop medical insurance or other financial schemes to help us deal with the ever spiraling costs of medical care.

It has been said that "there is no health without mental health." This saying strikes a distinct chord in Palau where research is showing that Palau has a rather high rate of schizophrenia. Since early 1950s, some research has been conducted into the behavioral health of Palauans with such mental disorder and some families have been identified to carry a certain gene that perpetuates this disorder. More genetic research is required to further shed light on all this. Suicide rates and suicidal ideation and tendencies are also challenges, particularly among our young people who may be struggling with the stresses associated with our changing society, perhaps feeling strapped within our traditional culture while trying to adapt to a modern, westernized culture of today.

Development of adequate human resources in medicine, public health, nursing, and allied health is a major challenge for Palau. At present, there appears to be a sufficient number of physicians working within our health community; however, a good number of them are expatriates who will one day have to return to their respective countries. And it is difficult to find young students interested to pursue a health career to one day replenish our current physician staff. The nursing situation is also a major challenge. We have had to import nurses, notably from Fiji, but at a high cost to us; and that source is also drying up as the world-wide shortage of nursing is impacting us.

A policy we have adopted is to conduct our own training programs where high school graduates are recruited to take such training that prepares them for entry level into nursing and allied health. Once gaining entry into a chosen field, we attempt to place promising students at medical, health or nursing schools locally and abroad where Palauan students may train and return home to serve our health needs. We also continue to conduct in-house training and rely on professionals at home and abroad for assistance, in person or by distance learning through the wonders of cyberspace and fast travel. At present, a group of pharmacy technicians are taking courses via Internet to enhance their development in pharmacy and others are on distance flexible learning in public health.

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for us by the United States and was opened in 1992, just before we gained independence in 1994. With the changing health environment and changing needs, we find the hospital increasingly becoming small. Where there were no isolation rooms available before, we had to make major changes since the advent of SARS last year. Our hemodialysis unit is expanding as this particular population is slowly increasing; thus, it becomes a real challenge for our Public Health to train the community about healthful lifestyles to avoid onset of diabetes and eventually renal failure leading to hemodialysis. This is our costliest health care sector, and our best policy is to ensure prevention of hypertension and diabetes among our people in order to curb this cost in the long run.

As a small developing country, Palau has limited medical equipment for basic medical care. We have been the fortunate recipient of the goodness of our friends and neighbors with their donations of equipment. However, as good as their intentions are, oftentimes we find donated equipment unsuitable for our needs, either because of sophistication, outdated models, lack of parts, or lack of trained technicians to maintain them. Therefore, we work with the policy that where friends and donors wish to contribute that they kindly find out what our needs are before making donations that may prove useful to us.

Through much assistance from the World Health Organization, we have benefited immensely with training and many other useful programs and information about health. For example, we have established our own blood bank, working towards safer blood, and working towards a volunteer donor system.

Palau is proud to have signed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control on the first day when it became available for signing, and went on to become the ninth country to ratify this treaty. We continue our work towards cessation of smoking and have seen some success among our population; the challenge we face, though, is the use of tobacco in betel nut chewing!

Palau has been a grateful recipient of assistance and donations from its friends around the world, but most particularly from the Pacific Rim, especially the larger countries in the Pacific region. An example of the help we have received from our friend includes the following: when Palau experienced a disastrous dengue fever epidemic in 2000, Taiwan came through with intravenous fluids and other medical supplies to meet our shortage; in these last four years, Taiwan assisted us with a rotation of obstetricians/gynaecologists until our newly trained specialist physician finally returned home from school; one of our doctors is currently in his third year of training in Taiwan to become a pathologist; and two babies with harelip/cleft palates were referred to Taipei for reconstructive surgery and are doing very well today. Indeed, we have received much assistance from the people and government of the Republic of China for which we are much grateful.

On the home front and at the international level, Palau has attempted to reciprocate by advocating for Taiwan's entry into the World Health Organization, at least in observer status, if not given outright membership status. We continue to believe firmly that public health crosses all boundaries and respects no politics, and people should no longer be neglected or ignored where health is at issue!

The recent SARS outbreak is a case in point.

We continue to hope that we can reach across the Pacific Ocean to help each other out, particularly in matters of public health. I hope by contributing to this issue of Pacific Health Dialog, Palau can reach all our friends, especially the Pacificans. After all, we understand that Pacificans we may be descendants of some of the indigenous people of Taiwan, and may have inherited their genes; and so in sickness or in health, we may be connected together in many ways.

Mesulang

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The secret of happiness is not doing what one likes,
but in liking what one has to do
(Sir James M. Barrie 1860 - 1937)