

## The First Tongan Health Professionals Conference: Seeking Cultural Democracy for Health

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### Abstract

The Tongan Nurses Association of New Zealand (TNA) organized the First Tongan health Professionals Conference as part of workforce Project funded by the Ministry of Health in supporting Pacific professional organizations. The conference theme was Cultural Democracy as an overarching philosophy for provision of ethnic specific health and social services in New Zealand. The underlying motive for the conference was to place nurses in the context of health professionals and to promote the idea that Tongan nurses are needed and are willing to support all Tongan health workers. New Zealand.

Dr Debbie Ryan, Chief Advisor Pacific Health to the New Zealand Minister of Health, opened the Conference. Several other Tongan health professionals expounded on the achievement of Tongan health workers in New Zealand and noted that these achievements were closely associated with their beliefs in "Tonganess" and the unique place all Pacificans have in New Zealand health.

This conference generated much enthusiasm for Tongan ethnic specific health service provision, health work in general and nursing in particular. The fact that the nurses organized the First Tongan Health Professionals Conference was seen as a unique leadership initiative, emanating from the good will and trust usually expected of the Tongan nursing professionals at the health service level and in the community. There was desire to continue this type of ethnic specific approach to enhance equity and decrease health disparities in New Zealand. (PHD 2006 Vol 13 No 2 Pages 159 - 162)

### Introduction

The First Tongan Health Professionals Conference was organized by the Tongan Nurses Association of New Zealand (TNA)<sup>1</sup> as part of its Project with the New Zealand Ministry of Health (Agreement No. 297408/00 Supporting Pacific Professional Organizations). This multidisciplinary ethnic specific conference was organized to promote nursing and to assist in the social marketing for the recruitment of new nurse trainees. The underlying motive for the conference was to place nursing in the context of health professionals in general and to advocate that Tongan nurses are needed and are very willing to support all Tongan health workers. The vision for the conference was "Health is a choice profession" and the mission was that nursing in particular is an essential component of all Tongan health

providers and programmes and nurses will contribute to building the capacity and, capability and coherence of all Tongan health workers. The conference theme was Cultural Democracy<sup>1, 2</sup> as an overarching philosophy for provision of ethnic specific health and social services. This philosophy legitimizes the humanity of equity and the inherent discriminations in equality<sup>3</sup>.

This gathering was a one day affair on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2006 at Waipuna Hotel Conference Centre, Mt Wellington, Auckland, New Zealand. There was a Conference Handbook compiled by TNA for the Conference<sup>1</sup>, which provided contextual information on the TNA, Conference Objectives and program, short biographical notes on the speakers, and abstracts of their presentations. In addition, some additional readings from Tongan authors on Tongan health matters were included. This proved to be a very popular and surprising addition to many, especially highlighting colleagues and issues of interest to the conference participants.

### The Conference

This one day affair was a celebration of Tongan Health Workers achievements and their coming of age in Aotearoa. It was food and laughter all day long. The language and humor of the day were mostly Tongan.

The highlights on the interactions were that it quickly became obvious that the Tongan language was not only a medium for exchange and communications, bilingual puns, double talk, but an excellent medium for thinking. The dichotomy of language as a communication tool and a medium for thinking were the source of hilarious misunderstanding and convoluted explanations bordering on mixed metaphors and nuances.

Reverend Tavake Tupou gave the opening prayer and blessing, followed by a word of welcome from the Patron, Mrs. 'Elenoa Kaifonua Tupouniua. The able chairperson for the day was Ms Lita Foliaki. Lita's sense of humor and decorum carried the day and softened the usual conference blues and hitches. Six (10%) of the evaluation responders considered her the high light of the conference.

Dr Debbie Ryan, Chief Advisor Pacific Health, opened the Conference. She spoke with humility and genuine support for the ethnic specific efforts of the Tongan nurses and wondered if others may follow suite. She formally opened the Conference and wished everyone well on this unique and important occasion.

"Cultural Democracy" was the theme of the conference and the keynote speech on "Cultural Democracy: a Framework for Providing Services" was from Dr 'Ana Hau'alofa'ia Koloto, an academic, researcher and Tongan entrepreneur. Four (7%) responders considered her a highlight of the Conference. Several other Tongan health professionals expounded on the achievement of Tongan health workers in New Zealand and noted that these achievements were closely associated with their beliefs in Tonganess and the unique place all Pacificans have contributed to New Zealand health.

At the end of the day, evaluation forms were distributed to the participants. The result of the responses is attached on Table 2. The response rate to the evaluation form was (39%). The answer to each satisfaction question were closed-ended and were ranked with least satisfied (*Little*) to *Moderate*, *Much*, and *Totally*. Each response category was given a score of 1 to 5, respectively. So for each question the highest possible score would be a **Totally** response from all 61 responders. So the composite measure of satisfaction was the percentage (%) score  $\{ \text{sum of total score for each question} / \text{total highest possible score of } 305 \times 100 \}$  of the response for each question.

When asked about the highlights of the Conference 61% of the responders said that the whole conference was great and 18% expressed appreciation for the Conference handbook<sup>1</sup> The range of topics covered

and the presentations were considered by 16% of the responders as conference highlights. When asked about the Conference aspect to change 16% of the responders did not want to change anything. However, 30% wanted to improve the time keeping, and to have fewer speeches and more discussions and panels

### Conclusion:

This conference generated much enthusiasm for Tongan ethnic specific service provision, health work in general and nursing in particular. The participants expressed gratefulness for TNA generosity in bringing the Tongan health workers together to share and celebrate professional experiences and real life incidences as health providers and clients. The predominant use of the Tongan language and the use of humor to ease sensitive and controversial issues, related to living in New Zealand as a migrant minority group, enhanced the ability of the attendees to participate in discussions often covered and controlled by the Pakeha predominant paradigm.

The conference was a refreshing and constructive medium to celebrate the Tongan health workers and to identify areas for more work and serious examinations. At the outset 200 copies of the conference handbooks<sup>1</sup> were produced. These were all taken at the end of the conference, indicating a hunger for Tongan specific and relevant information. The Conference organizers continue to receive messages of appreciation and astonishments on the quality of the publication and quantity of Tongan specific information it contains.

The theme of cultural democracy allowed the conference participants to freely dialogue about their place in New Zealand and their dreams of health without disparity. It was obvious that ethnic specific response was highly desired and valued. This may resolve access, utilization and compliance issues that have plagued Pacificans in the New Zealand health disparity situation.

Nursing and nurses featured as a desirable and achievable pathway to health of Tongans in New Zealand. The suggested place of nurses in the provision of services varied from the community, public health to clinical services at primary, secondary and tertiary care. The fact that the nurses organized the First Tongan Health Professionals Conference was seen as a unique leadership initiative emanating from the goodwill and trust usually expected of the Tongan nursing professionals at the health service level and in the community.

Table 1 summarizes the conference proceedings achievements of this Tongan multidisciplinary conference.

**Table 1: Conference summary.**

Outcome Expected	Report
i) The promotion of nursing as a career choice for other health workers	159 participants attended the Conference. Many of the attendees were health workers but were not necessarily nurses. These included social workers, youth workers, church ministers, workers in the area of disability, mental health, gambling prevention workers, public health, health of the elderly, early child hood workers, media, managers, and directors of institutions, community people, health promoters, dietitian. The presentation and discussions incorporated social and, cultural issues as well as health matters.
ii) To identify and recruit nurses for further training	Some of the participants expressed interest on nursing as a career for themselves and their relatives. The Conference fulfilled the initial effort to raise the profile of nursing among Tongan health workers. TNA will build on this foundation to further identify individuals and families in the community that will enter nursing and community health works.
ii) To improve awareness of the many roles nurses play in a health system and canvass support from other health workers for these roles.	<p>90% of the content of the conference programme was about areas of health that were not secondary hospital related, as is the traditional context of nursing in Tonga. The conference content included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- traditional Tongan concepts of health</li> <li>- mental health</li> <li>- youth health</li> <li>- Health needs of the elderly and people with disability.</li> </ul> <p>The nurses attending the conference were given the opportunity to appreciate the many different roles that nurse's play in the above areas. They also gained a deeper understanding of how their cultural values, knowledge and skills enable them to be especially effective in working with Tongan people in contexts other than in the hospital and GP contexts.</p> <p>The needs analysis undertaken by the TNA as part of this contract identified a high degree of professional dissatisfaction on the part of Tongan nurses<sup>4</sup>. The conference was an important opportunity for these nurses to see options that they can develop and specialize in as well as a greater understanding of the role of other professional groups that they need to work collaboratively with.</p> <p>There was almost complete engagement from the nurses with all the processes of the Conference. Most participants found the presentations, speeches and discussions inspiring and the spirit of the day was "mafana" It served to recommit nurses and others in the conference to work together.</p>

**Table 2: Satisfaction score by Conference item**

Satisfaction with Conference Item	Response rate (%)	Satisfaction score (%)	Other Comments
Pre-conference Information	15	13	Use radio and word of mouth more
Pre-conference Communication	15	29	
Conference Venue	39	79	Try a Pacific venue
Conference Catering	39	82	Healthy, delicious food
Learning from the Conference in general	39	94	Need more discussions
<b>Presentations on:</b>		81	
Nursing for Tongans	39		Upbringing important
Tongan Families	39	89	Important values and humor
Cultural Democracy	39	89	Great and relevant
Diet and Well being	39	83	Create Tongan framework
Fonua Model	39	88	Deep and enjoyable
Tongan and Mental Health	39	85	Good on Tongan for Tongans
Tongan Medical Care	39	90	Humour, quality and meaty

Most of the responders (97%) requested to repeat this conference be repeated. TNA anticipates that it will again rise for the occasion and provide the leadership needed for such an initiative. But include the community not just the health workers.

**References**

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4. Koloto A (2006). Need assessment of Tongan Nurses in New Zealand. An unpublished report from Koloto and Associates to TNA and the New Zealand Ministry of Health. (Unpublished report)

*"If there is a way to do it better...find it"*  
(Thomas A.Edison)