

# In-country and community-based postgraduate family practice training for Micronesian physicians - the Palau AHEC: a collaborative effort

**Abstract:** The U.S. Institute of Medicine in its 1998 review of the health care systems among the U.S.-Associated Pacific Islands (USAPI) identified promotion of primary health care (PHC) and training of the regional health workforce including postgraduate training for physicians as priorities. With the support of the health leadership of the USAPI and the Republic of Palau, the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) of the University of Hawaii captured U.S. federal Area Health Education Center (AHEC) funds to implement a postgraduate program to train Family Practitioners - physician specialists. The program has involved into a joint activity of JABSOM, the University of Auckland Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (UAFMHS), the School of Public Health & Primary Care, Fiji School of Medicine, and Palau Community College to provide Dip-

In July 2001 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services / Health Resources and Services Administration (DHHS / HRSA) notified the University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) that it would fund through September 2002 the Palau Area Health Education Center (Palau AHEC) whose core mission is to train up to 20 Micronesian physicians in a Postgraduate Diploma program in Family Practice (FP) in Palau. The FP Training Program is a joint education and training activity involving JABSOM, the University of Auckland Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (UAFMHS), the Ministry of Health (MOH) of the Republic of Palau (ROP), and Palau Community College (PCC). The University of Auckland FMHS will conduct the academic training and credentialing leading to a Postgraduate Diploma in Medical Sciences (General Practice). JABSOM will provide the hands-on clinical and community health training within Palau's HRSA-funded Community Health Center (CHC) and clinic system. Palau Community College through a contract process with JABSOM will administer the AHEC grant locally and provide administrative support,

electronic and determine space for AHEC for students. Currently 11 Micronesian physicians are matriculating in the program. In recent developments, the Palau AHEC is also negotiating with the School of Public Health at the Fiji School of Medicine to provide academic and hands-on Community Health training for the Palau AHEC.

## Background

In 1998 the Pacific Basin Medical Association (PBMA) and the Palau MOH began communicating formally with the University of Auckland FMHS with view to establishing a FP training program in Micronesia for regional physicians. Although Primary Health Care and Community Health training in basic medical education were not new to Micronesia<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>, formal postgraduate training in PHC on a regional basis was lacking. In an effort to both elevate physician training in PHC to a specialty level and make such training more accessible to Micronesian physicians, the PBMA and the Republic of Palau lobbied for several years to establish

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a community-based FP Diploma/Masters training program for the region. In response, the University of Auckland submitted a formal "Expression of Interest" to both the PBMA and the ROP to establish such a program to be located in Palau. What were now needed were the financial resources to make the program so. To this end and in collaboration with UAFMHS, the PBMA, and the Palau Ministry of Health, the University of Hawaii's JABSOM, as part of its reapplication process for its Hawaii-based AHEC programs, in December 2000 submitted a grant reapplication to HRSA/DHHS that included establishing an in-country FP training program in the Palau. This proposal was consistent with the recommendations of the 1998 Institute of Medicine's report - "*Pacific Partnerships for Health: Charting a New Course for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*" - which strongly recommended the development of postgraduate training programs for physicians from the U.S. Associated Pacific Islands (USAPI).<sup>5</sup>

**In the context of a regional in-country postgraduate medical education program, the FP Program trainees from Palau and other countries of Micronesia will provide primary and community health care service, research, and health reform.**

**The proposed FP program would be a joint effort between the JABSOM Department of Family**

Practice and Community Health and the University of Auckland FMHS Department of General Practice to conduct an in-country, academic and clinical, Diploma-level training program to train up to 20 Micronesian Family Practitioners in Palau over a three year period. To affect this JABSOM would establish the Palau Area Health Education Center (Palau AHEC) to develop and conduct the FP program. JABSOM would administer the grant resources and provide clinical FP training while the FMHS would conduct the academic component and credentialing of the training that would lead to an internationally recognized Postgraduate Diploma in Medical Sciences (PGDipMedSc) in General Practice. This would open the door for qualified candidates to continue on in a Masters of Medical Sciences (MMedSc) track. The locus of academic training would take place on the Palau Community College Campus. The hands-on clinical and community training would be conducted within Palau's Community Health Center (CHC) system in its Out-patient Department and community clinics located throughout the Palau archipelago. In the context of a regional in-country postgraduate medical education program, the FP Program trainees from Palau and other countries of Micronesia will provide primary and community health care service, research, and health reform. This program would also be integrated with the new Palau Community College Pacific Center for Emergency Health - a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funded pilot program to provide regional training and technical assistance in Disaster Medicine and Emergency Medical Services development.

JABSOM was notified in August 2001 that the Palau AHEC would be funded from September 30, 2001 through September 29, 2004. Currently 11 Resident Micronesian physicians (8 Palau, 2 Yap, 1 RMI) are now matriculating in the Palau AHEC both in Palau and Yap.

**Pilot Postgraduate Public Health Courses in Palau:**

In anticipation of developing this joint FP training program in Palau, the MOH and the FMHS Department of Pacific Health commenced a pilot program in January 2001 to initiate Diploma/Masters training courses in Public Health for Palau health workers. Part of the plan was to assess the strengths and challenges of conducting such in-country postgraduate training courses for select Palau health care workers. Up to 17 Palau physicians, nurses, and health administrators have participated in the courses. By mid-2002 Palau participants will have completed four separate courses and be eligible to receive a Certificate in Public Health - halfway to earning a Diploma in Public Health and one fourth of the way to completing a MPH. It is anticipated that postgraduate courses in Public Health will also be offered to interested Palau AHEC FP training candidates.

**Program development time line**

- 1995-1996 PBMA meetings endorse the need for Postgraduate Family Practice Training Program for regional physicians.
- 1998 Institute of Medicine Report published recommending postgraduate training for Micronesian doctors.<sup>5</sup>
- 1998 Formal communications between the Republic of Palau Ministry of Health and UAFMHS begin.
- 1998 UAFMHS responds to PBMA and Palau MOH with a formal "Expression of Interest" to develop a FP Training Program in Micronesia.
- 1998 Pacific Island Health Officers Association (PIHOA) supports development of a regional Family Practice Training
- 1999 Site visit to Palau by now UAFMHS Assistant Dean of Flexible Learning
- 2000 JABSOM submits 3-year grant proposal to HRSA to establish Palau AHEC to develop and conduct a joint JABSOM - UAFMHS FP Training Program in Micronesia.
- 2001 MOH and UAFMHS begin pilot Public Health postgraduate training courses in Palau.
- 2001 6<sup>th</sup> PBMA Annual Conference formally endorses proposed FP Training program for Palau.
- 2001 Grant proposal funded by HRSA.

2001	PIHOA reaffirms support for regional FP Training.
2002	Class I begins studies.
2003	Class II to begin studies.

## Palau AHEC training format

### Overall, the Palau AHEC Family Practice Training Program

becoming critical that any capacity building efforts must incorporate strategies to constructively evaluate, formulate and implement solutions to these different influences. Some of these realities include:

- Transition in Health Status
- Changing Demographics
- Transition in Governance
- Health Reform and Re Orientation
- Cultural Advancement and Modernization
- Business and Management of Health Care Systems
- Health Advocacy

In orienting the training efforts to deal with these realities, the training will allow for the capacity to realistically evaluate, solve and monitor common problems encountered locally and in the region.

#### Objectives:

The objectives of the training are to provide the credentials for advancement in practice and compensation for the physicians in region who have chosen to pursue Community and Family Medicine. This is consistent with WHO's Yanuca Declaration, the HRSA-funded Institute of Medicine Report (1998)<sup>1</sup>, and the Palau National Agenda, all of which are part of the Palau National Master Plan. The goal of this activity is to train Community and Family Medicine Specialists who will deal with Primary (Clinical) and Preventive (Community) Health back in their own island nations.

#### Activities:

The activities are designed to meet both the objectives of Primary Health Care as well as Preventive Health Care with the view to decreasing mortality (Primary Health Care) and decreasing morbidity (Preventive Health Care). Therefore, there will be Clinic-based activities (mainly primary services) and Community-based activities (mainly preventive services).

#### Primary Health Care

- Health Care Systems
- Program Designs
- Service Provision
- Clinical Services
- Provider-Client Engagement
- Quality Assurance and Peer Review

#### Preventive Health Care

- Community Mapping
- Community Engagement
- Community Planning Process

#### Introduction:

The Work Force Development in the region necessitates that we look at the realities as they exist within the region and tailor the activities according to them. These realities are not only clinical but more importantly now must incorporate the political, psychosocial, environmental and cultural forces that influence the well being of our population. In this regard, it is now

consists of four learning strands: 1) UAFMHS Postgraduate Diploma Program, 2) Clinical Training, 3) Community Health Training, and 4) Special Topics.

### 1. UAFMHS Postgraduate Diploma Program

The UAFMHS training program will be conducted over an eight-month period (March to November). Class I with 13 physician candidates commenced in March 2002. Class II will enter in early 2003. At the end of this training period a Postgraduate Diploma in Medical Sciences (PGDipMedSc) in General Practice will be awarded. Selected students will then be invited to continue on to matriculate in a Masters of Medical Sciences (MMedSc) track. Although the Masters training track may be currently outside of the scope of current AHEC grant resources, it is not outside of the scope of Palau AHEC planning for next steps.

UAFMHS will provide the curriculum and conduct the academic training component of the Diploma program through a combination of flexible learning techniques including face-to-face learning, distance learning methods utilizing real time video conferencing (VTC) via the University of Hawaii's PEACESAT system, distance lecturing by telephone with PowerPoint slides, videotapes, and course workbooks. Seven courses will comprise of 14 credit points leading to the core qualification (Postgraduate Diploma of Medical Science).

### 2&3. Clinical and Community Health Training

During the second semester of studies, 50% of student activities will be involved in supervised clinical and community-based training within the Palau Community Health Center system by AHEC, JABSOM, UAFMHS, and Palau MOH staff. This will include clinical activities in CHC outpatient and dispensary settings and select inpatient rotations at Belau National Hospital (BNH). Clinical activities will include the UH Department of Family Practice and Community Health/Wahiawa General Hospital Family Practice Residency Training Guidelines. Community-based training will take place in both urban and rural settings throughout Palau. According to Family Practitioner Dr. Stevenson Kuartei, the Palau AHEC Associate Director and CHC Medical Director, working in the community "is the real thing, not just training". The following outlines his vision of Community Health training:

- Community and Environmental Audits
- Screening Process
- Health Promotion and Education

#### *Primary and Preventive Health Care*

- Marriage of the two disciplines
- Culture and Health
- Politics and Health
- Teaching and Training

Dr. Kuartei and his colleagues are now in preliminary negotiations with the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM) School of Public Health to assist the Palau AHEC in providing the formal academic Community Health learning tracks to support its Community Health learning strand.

## 4. Special Topics

Special Topics include short-term learning and hands-on clinical training activities which follow four lines of inquiry: 1) Clinical Medicine, Management, and Prevention, 2) Community Health, 3) Learning, Research and Informatics, and 4) Health Administration and Health Reform. The educational framework of topics largely is based on but not limited to the American Academy of Family Practice Recommended Curriculum Guidelines for Family Practice Residents. Special Topics will also include such short-term training activities as training in disaster management (DM) and emergency medical services (EMS) development. The Palau AHEC is partnering with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Pacific Emergency Health Initiative (PEHI) program and the PEHI-funded Pacific Center for Emergency Health (PCEH), which is based at Palau Community College. The PEHI-PCEH activities will be part of a regional CDC "Bioterrorism" capacity building program and include public health DM and EMS training (see related *PHD* article by Yano et al in this issue). The Palau AHEC is also incorporating the University of Washington School of Medicine's Pacific Island Clinical Continuing Education Program (PICCEP) into its curriculum. PICCEP is another HRSA-funded program that provides continuing education (CME) for regional health care workers. Special Topics will also include lectures by visiting JABSOM, AUFMHS, and FSM faculty. The Palau AHEC will assist the MOH and PCC in coordinating these courses, which may be attended by all physicians and other members of the health workforce in Palau for which they will receive formal continuing medical educational credits. The Special Topics strand offers the flexibility of incorporating all training opportunities in Palau that arise relevant to FP Resident training.

**These courses tested the mettle of local physicians and other health workers – including Palau's Vice President and Minister of Health - by exposing them to international standard Postgraduate courses and the joys and challenges of matriculating while juggling full time administrative, clinical, family, and cultural responsibilities.**

## JABSOM's Hawaii and Palau AHECs

Area Health Education Center grants are awarded by the U.S. DHHS / HRSA to U.S. medical schools to promote innovative health workforce training programs. Since 1995 JABSOM has conducted AHEC-funded programs with the mission "to improve the health of the underserved through education". To this end the Hawaii AHEC in select communities in Hawaii 1) has trained JABSOM Family Practice Residents, 2) conducted community-oriented interdisciplinary training programs for medical, nursing, social worker students and other health professional students, 3) promoted health careers opportunities and awareness programs in elementary and high schools particularly targeting ethnic groups underrepresented in the health workforce, 4) provided recruitment and retention activities including continuing education for health care professionals in rural and underserved areas, and 5) promoted health education activities at community learning centers throughout the Hawaiian Islands.

The Palau AHEC is JABSOM's third AHEC program and is the only U.S. AHEC based outside of the United States.

## The Palau AHEC and the University of Auckland

Key stakeholders at the University of Auckland Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences have included Professor Ross McCormick, Assistant Dean and Director, Goodfellow Flexible Learning Unit, and Dr. Sitaleki Finau, Senior Lecturer, Pacific Health Programme, Division of Maori and Pacific Health. Dr. Finau, a former Associate Director of JABSOM's Pacific Basin Medical Officers Training Program in Pohnpei<sup>6,7</sup>, put the Palau MOH and PBMA in contact with Prof. McCormick to begin the process of a formal "Expression of Interest" by FMHS to explore the feasibility of establishing a distance Postgraduate General Practice Training Program in Palau. In 1999 Prof. McCormick site visited Palau to meet with local health and education leaders and assess the political will of the Palau Government to make the project so. Dr. Finau, in order to prove that distance learning for physicians in Palau would work, commenced in January 2001 the first UAFMHS distance learning courses outside of New Zealand. These courses tested the mettle of local physicians and other health workers – including Palau's Vice President and Minister of Health - by exposing them to international standard Postgraduate courses and the joys and challenges of matriculating while juggling full time administrative, clinical, family, and cultural responsibilities. Dr. McCormick has since organized his teaching colleagues

at UAFMHS to develop the distance-learning activities for the Palau AHEC, which he characterizes as "very exciting". To follow this up, the Pro Vice Chancellor (International) - Professor Barry Gustafson - recently visited with JABSOM's Senior Associate Dean Satoru Izutsu to discuss the collaborative JABSOM-USFMHS efforts in Palau and suggested that the University of Hawaii join the Pacific Rim Association of Universities.

### Palau AHEC and Palau Community College

In order to assist Palau Community College to further develop its health sciences training capacity, JABSOM has contracted PCC to locally administer and conduct the Palau AHEC. Through this process PCC will have the resources over time to better develop and sustain its own health sciences training infrastructure. The PCC AHEC office and a multipurpose classroom will become a Community Learning Center providing a locus for formal and informal learning and community-based training activities. AHEC FP Physician Residents will also have access to relevant PCC courses, particularly in the area of computer sciences, and, in turn, provide medical and preventive health services for the PCC Student Clinic.

### Palau AHEC and the Fiji School of Medicine

Dr. Sitaleki Finau, since the submission of JABSOM's AHEC grant proposal in late 2000, has been appointed Professor and Head, School of Public Health, at the Fiji School of Medicine. In October 2002 Dr. Finau was appointed the Pacific Community Health Advisor for the Palau AHEC and, along with Dr. Stevenson Kuartei, has been closely involved in designing the program's Community Health training strand. Currently the Palau AHEC is exploring with the FSM how it might assist the Palau program in conducting its academic and hands on Community Health curriculum.

### "It's the real thing, not just training..."

The Palau AHEC is an ambitious and innovative program - responding to regional training needs - to bring formal and internationally recognized postgraduate training in Primary Health Care to the Pacific Islands for Pacific Island physicians. This JABSOM - UAFMHS effort along with its Palau and regional partners is a pilot program committed through postgraduate physician training and educations to stimulate PHC and Community Health Center development in the region. Professionally its goal is to also elevate PHC physician training to a specialty level to be viewed as equally prestigious as off island hospital-based clinical training. The locus of training will be the community and as Dr. Kuartei states above: "It's the real thing, not just training..." The opportunities of developing further training and collaborative activities for Pacific Island physicians and other mem-

bers of the health workforce is limited only by the vision of JABSOM, FMHS, and FSM medical educators and regional health care stakeholders.

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