

Directors of Clinical Services Meeting

Réunion des directeurs des services cliniques

(LOGO/HEADER TO BE DEVELOPED)

Impact of the Family Medicine Program in Tonga

Strengthening of Primary Health Care in Tonga is a priority of the Ministry of Health, as the benefits are much and cost of healthcare less, if conducted well.

Delivery of Family Medicine courses (Postgraduate and Masters) by ROCKETSHIP (Trainer from Australia), is a key component to ensuring that the Primary Health Care Services delivery is strengthened thus achieving better health outcomes. This training began with four intakes for the post graduate diploma. Of the four, three were qualified to undertake the Masters program and are currently in their 3rd year. There have been more intakes since and if funding is available, we would like to see more of our doctors enrolling in this program.

1. BACKGROUND

The Family Medicine program in Tonga was designed almost single handedly by the former Medical Superintendent of Vaiola Hospital, Dr. Lisiate ‘Ulufonua. It was his vision that Tonga will achieve the



quality standard of national health indicators, typically associated with developed countries.

In an article by David Gilchrist, Rocketship Feature August 2021 titled **”Family Medicine Education key to Health Care in Tonga”**, Dr ‘Ulufonua was quoted as saying, “I wanted to develop a career path for doctors who were actually working out in the remote islands in healthcare in Tonga ,”

Strengthening the Primary Health Care System of the Nation is envisaged as the key to better health outcomes.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Why Family Medicine?

Reports from international research shows that higher quality primary care is associated with better health outcomes such as fewer deaths from heart disease and stroke, lower Infant Death Rates, and higher life expectancy. It is more cost effective as focus is on prevention with lower hospitalisation rate and earlier more efficient care. Additionally is the geographical equity of access to essential services. This is key to universal health coverage, with the belief that with more doctor graduates from the Family Medicine programme, our people will be better cared for, our health outcomes will improve and we may win our fight with NCD.

2.2. How?

With the vision to develop a career pathway for doctors working in remote Islands of Tonga, Dr Uluifonua met with the Remote Opportunities for Clinical Knowledge, Education, Training, and Support for Health In the Pacific (ROCKETSHIP). Rocketship’s expertise is in teaching and mentoring rural and remote medicine trainees with special interest in the Pacific. Apart from Tonga, Rocketship works with The Solomon Island National University in providing training for doctors in Solomon,

Ministry of Health Vanuatu on the islands of Espiritu Santo and Tanna, and Timor-Leste with the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) and Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e¹.

The Family Medicine Program kicked off in 2019 with four trainees undertaking the post graduate diploma. Three successfully completed this and went onto the Master program in Family Medicine. Dr. 'Ana Maile who is co-presenting is one of these trainees.

2.3 What have been the Achievements thus Far?

A total of five have graduated with PG Diploma, four have carried onto the Master program and two are still completing the PG Diploma. There are plans for additional doctors to enrol into the programme. A pleasing achievement is seeing doctors at leadership level in agreement with Dr 'Ulufonua's vision. There have been discussions to establish "Super Clinics" in Tonga. This is a current undertaking, with support from the Australian government Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT), for the 1st Super Clinic. This initiative will allow these trained Family Medicine Doctors to deliver services to communities with the aim of involving people to take ownership of their health.

3. CHALLENGES

3.1 'Buy in' from Clinicians

It had not been easy getting doctors to accept this program. Most doctors preferred specialist training after completing their internship and Island Tour. The Health System was geared this way that "clinical doctors" need to specialise in some field of medicine. Moreover there was no career pathway for primary health care doctors, and was deemed not attractive enough for the new graduates. However, with Dr 'Ulufonua's perseverance, some of the new graduates joined this program.

3.2. Funding

Our main challenge to delivery of this program is funding. There has been support from DFAT. However sometimes some of the modules cannot be delivered due to lack of or no funding.

¹ <https://rocket-ship.org/where-we-work>

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The impact of a new health programme and most importantly skills and knowledge achieved from graduates cannot be measured instantly. It is important that monitoring the impact of this programme includes achievements and indicators that can be still measured in 3-5 years. Moreover the support of the Ministry as a whole is essential to sustaining and funding the programme.

Tonga Ministry of Health will continue to seek funding from development partners and donors to ensure this programme persists in country and with achievements to showcase. Most importantly is ensuring that this is another means or pathway towards achieving UHC and essentially quality of healthcare and healthy lifestyle.