

Directors of Clinical Services Meeting

Réunion des directeurs des services cliniques

The Pacific Radiology Society

Radiology Services in the Pacific is one of the least developed fields of Medicine in the Region. There are very few doctors trained in Radiology and the few that are trained hold only post graduate diplomas, as there is no program at Fiji National University) FNU at the Master or Radiologist level. In contrast, other specialised fields such as Internal Medicine, Surgery, Paediatric, Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Pathology have training programs up to the Masters level. Therefore convincing young doctors to choose Radiology as their career without a proper career path can be very difficult.

The inaugural Pacific regional meeting for radiologists, therapists and technicians was held in October 2019, a few months before WHO¹ announced COVID-19 as a Pandemic. The outcomes from this meeting included the establishment of the Pacific Radiology Society Incorporated (PRadSI) registered in Tonga as a Not for profit, non-governmental organisations. It is imperative that the next meeting include the election of the office bearers for this organisation which we believe will greatly aid in the development of this field of Medicine in the region.

The value of developing this field is core to management of patients with its curative aspect e.g. interventional radiology seen as a well-recognised specialty area. The attitude of old, that “everyone can read an x-ray” is out-dated as Radiology is more than simply taking an x-ray. Areas within Radiology such as ultrasonography, (Computed tomography) CT and even Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) are now available in the Pacific. Without a quality Radiology service in our PICTs there will not be quality health care delivery.

¹ World Health Organisation

1. BACKGROUND

Following the 13th Pacific Health Minister's Meeting in August 2019 in French Polynesia, commitment towards the Healthy Island vision, progression towards universal health coverage and the attainment of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 were made. These included strengthening primary health care; continued efforts to define and implement the right service model for UHC at the national level; championing a Pacific-specific approach to advancing the safe and affordable surgery agenda... (13 PHMM, 2019).

As such, through the Pacific Community (SPC) which provides technical support to Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), the 1st ever Regional Radiology Meeting was convened in Nadi, Fiji on 7th-9th October 2019. Twenty-one (21) Participants attended from 12 PICTs together with Development partners, members from Training institute and SPC staff – the latter who convened the meeting.

The aim of the meeting was to bring together Radiologist and Radiographers in the Pacific to have an in-depth discussion on the services provided in the Pacific, and suggest ways, if possible, in which the services could be improved upon.

The following were meeting outcomes that were to be presented in the next Directors of Clinical Services Meeting:

- Establishment of a Regional Radiology Society.
- Increase in Radiology Workforce Training and Capacity Building in the Pacific thus contributing towards improving Radiology Services in PICTs.
- Importance of Ensuring Radiology Equipment are well maintained and that service agreements are in place as well as staff training for each new equipment that is purchased. There should also be a regional policy to manage donated equipment to PICTs.
- Development of a Regional Radiology Plan.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Establishment of a Regional Radiology Society:

The Pacific Radiology Society Incorporated (PRadSI) was registered in 2020 Tonga as a not-for-profit Non-Government Organisation (NGO).

The aims of the PRadSI are:

- To advocate for and provide leadership in Pacific Islands Radiology
- To support capacity building for Pacific Island Radiologists and Medical Imaging Technologists (Radiologists and /or Sonographers).
- To encourage close collaborations in the Pacific Radiology Community.
- To provide a forum for Pacific Island Radiologists and Medical Imaging Technologists to dialogue and learn from each other in matters relating to their practice with the aim of improving Radiology Services in the Pacific.
- To foster closer relationship with International Radiology Organisations such as Royal Australia and New Zealand College of Radiology and Radiology Across Borders or any other interested Radiology Organisations.

A constitution and logo was written and designed by the working group. Given the impact of COVID-19, the 1st Annual General Meeting (AGM) could not be convened since all activities were reprioritised towards preparation and response to this Pandemic.

2.2 Increase Capacity Building of the existing Radiology Workforce in the Pacific.

The only Training Institute in the Pacific to cater for Radiology is at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). This institution hosts a 4-year Masters program, with the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu boasting graduates from this program. Fiji and Tonga send one participant each in 2019. Both Fiji and UPNG offer degree level program in Imaging Technology.

2.2.1 Radiology Across Borders & University of British Columbia International Certificate of Radiology Fundamentals (ICRF).

From the outcome of the 2019 meeting, Radiology Across Borders (RAB) offered a program called International Certificate in Radiology Fundamentals (ICRF), accredited by University of British Columbia in Canada. This was a 12-month online program, open to all doctors and radiographers, technicians, sonographers in developing countries including PICTs. The first cohort in 2020 had 22 members from the PICTs, jointly supported by SPC (one paid for her own). All 22 + 1 PICTs participants were successful in completing this course. In 2022, there are 21 participants and so far, the course is going well despite the Covid 19 and its challenges.

In addition to ICRF, RAB also offers monthly webinars, for doctors as well as a different program for technicians. There are also 3 monthly conferences that some of our members attend virtually. These opportunities are much appreciated by us in the Pacific who work remotely without much back-up support.

2.3 Radiology Equipment:

Individual countries have their own policies regarding service maintenance. To date, there has not been any regional co-ordinated work for this activity and this is an area that PRadSI will need to address as an undertaking as most PICTs share a common lack of Biomedical Engineer particularly in the field of Radiology.

2.4 Development of Regional Radiology Plan (RRP).

The RRP is work in progress and support is needed from governments, SPC and other funding agencies to ensure the plan comes to fruition. More important is the ability to implement this plan and is a mandate for PRadSi to complete.

3. CHALLENGES

3.1 Lack of Capacity building and Training Pathways for Radiologists in the Pacific.

Given that the only training institution in the Pacific for Radiology is at UPNG, FNU is yet to offer training of Radiologists in the Pacific. This lack of training pathway makes choosing Radiology as a career in Medicine unattractive and could be the reason why there are very few Radiology doctors in the Pacific.

For most of the PICTs, security was the number one issue of why they hesitate to send students to UPNG. Most Registrars have families and would like their families to join them in PNG, as 4 years is a long time to be away from them, however the lack of security prevents this from occurring. If given the choice, Fiji would be the preferred country to train in.

3.2 Radiology a Supporting Service

Discussions during the inaugural Radiology meeting indicated that one of the major challenges to provision of quality Radiology Service is, that this service is still seen as support services alongside Laboratory, and not a core service to patient management. It is essential that we as Leaders in Health in the Pacific, advocate for this change in mind set, conforming that diagnostic services are key to provision of good quality care in Medicine.

3.3 Equipment Maintenance is Expensive

The equipment used in Radiology are very expensive to buy and maintain. Most PICTs budgets cannot sustain maintaining equipment such as CT, MRI, PET CT² etc. Ultrasound scan equipment is also expensive to buy and difficult to maintain. However, by strengthening the Radiology Services in the Pacific, each PICT will know what equipment to ask for, so services provided are cost effective and sustainable for a long time e.g. it is not envisioned that Tonga have an MRI and PET CT in next 10 years without the establishment of a comprehensive Oncology service or other specialities such as Neurology surgery etc.

3.4 Lack of Biomedical Engineer Services in the Pacific Islands.

Only a few countries in the Pacific have a working Biomedical Engineer. Most rely on visiting Biomedical Engineer to maintain all their equipment. This is another area that is lacking in the Pacific.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

4.1 Recommendations for governments:

- Strengthening of Radiology Services by getting the right equipment, fit for purpose that is sustainable to each PICTs.
- Support provision of Radiology Training in a nearby PICT such as at FNU, National University of Samoa, Tonga National University or Solomon Island National University in the near future.
- Support Training of Biomedical Engineers in the Pacific.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

- Advocate for Radiology Training in the Pacific.
- Seek pathways in which Existing Radiologists establish a link to RANZCR³ for more empowerment of the existing few number of doctors working in Radiology.
- Support the work of RAB that is providing educational opportunities to our Pacific people at minimal cost, if any.

² Positron Emission Tomography and Computed Tomography

³ Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists