

# Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery Meeting

## Réunion des directeurs des soins infirmiers et obstétricaux du Pacifique



### Building Nursing Workforce in the Cook Islands



NURSING  
WORKFORCE PLAN\_1



Cook-Islands-Health-  
Workforce-Plan-2016

## BACKGROUND

The Cook Islands is a small island developing state located in the Southern Pacific Ocean between French Polynesia and Fiji. It contains 15 islands and atolls which are spread over 2 million sq.km of ocean. Our island nation is geographically divided into 2 groups – the Southern group and the Northern Group which is famous for its black pearl farming. The Cook Islands has a combined population of just over 15,000.

Like many other small island developing states, the Cook Islands face a number of challenges including climate change, the high prevalence of noncommunicable disease and to the point of this presentation human resources in health care with the most recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlighting these challenges and the future of our nursing workforce

There are some key documents and policies, both a global and national level that guide the way we approach and address our nursing workforce. The Global Strategic Direction for Nursing and Midwifery 2021 -2025 (WHO) is a global document that the Cook Islands have used<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Global situation

The nursing workforce shortage is something that many countries continue to experience with the recent COVID-19 pandemic shining on light on how great this shortage is globally. Evidence from the 2020 WHO State of the worlds nursing report a few key points to take into account:

- Nursing accounts for approximately 59% of the health professional, making it the largest occupational health group in health.
- It estimates the global nursing workforce shortage to be 5.9 million with over 89% of that shortage concentrated in low and lower middle-income countries<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.2 Relevant global Policies and Document

The report provides 10 key action points to help address the above, 4 of which I will referring to in this presentation. That is:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240033863>

<sup>2</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/250368/9789241511131-eng.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [file:///C:/Users/WandWUser/Downloads/9789240033863-eng%20\(4\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/WandWUser/Downloads/9789240033863-eng%20(4).pdf)

- Effectively monitoring and responsibly and ethically managing nurse mobility and migration
- A focus on nurse education and training programs
- Strengthening nursing leadership and governance and lastly
- The coordination of actions by policymakers, employers and regulators in support of decent work

These key actions were further reflected in the most recent Global Strategic directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021 –2025<sup>3</sup> report which provides evidence-based practices and sets of policy priorities addressing:

- Education – by optimizing the domestic production of nurses in an education/training program that is competency-based and of high standard as well as ensuring that the faculty staff delivering these programs are properly trained and have clinical expertise
- Jobs – by conducting nursing workforce planning and forecasting and attracting, recruiting and retain nurses where they are most needed
- Leadership – by establishing and strengthening senior leadership positions in governance and management and more importantly to invest in leadership skills development and lastly,
- Service delivery – Review and strengthen professional regulatory systems and facilitate maximum contribution to service delivery by nurses by adapting workplaces as required.

*So how do these global documents, strategies and policies translate to a national level, to the Cook Islands?*

### **1.3 Local Policies**

These global strategic and policy documents have been used as the foundations in developing and guiding national strategies and policies for the Cook Islands around the sustainability of the health and nursing workforce. There are 2 key documents which address the key actions points and policy directives reported by WHO. They are the Cook Islands Health Workforce Plan 2016 – 2025, Workforce development pathway for Cook Islands Ministry of Health which addresses health workforce in its entirety and the Cook Islands Nursing strategic plan 2021 –2025.

Taking into account the global strategic plans and policies provided by WHO, our locals documents focus attention to our current overall health and nursing workforce, the distribution of the nursing workforce across the Cook Islands, the need and ability to substantially build our capacity and capability, the challenges in achieving these goals and the opportunities present. At a glance, the current nursing

workforce sits 86 nurses spread over 15 islands in an area of 2 million square kilometres of ocean with just over 67% of the total nursing workforce located in Rarotonga.

The Cook Islands have been innovative in terms of finding in-country solutions to address the nursing shortages, with the implementation of a School of Nursing offering a Nursing certificate program which started in 1977 and evolved to a Diploma certificate by 1988. However, during this time, the school of nursing underwent several periods of closures and reopening's due to a number of factors such as the economic crisis in 1996 and the lack of funds available during this time and appropriate, sufficient and dedicated teaching staff within the School of Nursing. Despite our efforts to address the nursing workforce, the Cook Islands has and continues to rely on the need to bring nurses from neighbouring countries such as Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Philippines to assist in the nursing workforce shortage. This proved to be a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic where travel became limited.

By 2017/2018, the School closed once again due to several challenges including quality of staffing and staffing issues, registration of the qualification, lack of qualification pathway and the standard of the qualification.

## 2. CHALLENGES

These were met with other challenges across the Nursing space such as:

- attracting school students for health-related careers, and managing competition from other countries, particularly Australia and New Zealand
- Retaining the workforce, as a result of isolation and a high workload for some roles; for specialists in particular, the current environment of daily on-call is not viable, and greater levels of cover are needed
- Succession planning for a workforce that is ageing in some key areas with lack of leadership mentoring and training upcoming and current senior/charge nurses
- Capacity and capability constraints, through piecemeal CPD and limited access to scholarships for training; routine work needing to be undertaken by staff at levels higher than appropriate; and reactive modes of operating with little practice care planning and collegial practice
- A workforce that is not well-gearred towards the challenge of non-communicable diseases and specialty areas and skills – specifically in wound care and palliative care. There is an increased number of chronic wounds, increased demands of palliative care in the community and of course
- Funding constraints, in that the health system was seen to be working within tight fiscal settings which created barriers to growing the workforce, and accessing continuing professional development (CPD) and continuing medical education (CME) opportunities

Now these challenges are not experienced by the Cook Islands alone. They are experienced by many countries, many health bodies and many health professionals globally and more importantly, they are recognised by the World Health Organisation whose Global strategic direction and policy priorities for nursing and midwifery is reflected in one of these policy priorities. They are Education, Jobs, Leadership and Service Delivery. However, amidst these challenges, there is a large range of celebrations and opportunities for development for the Cook Islands nursing workforce to be proud of and strive forward for

### 3. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

#### 3.1 COVID-19 Response

The first achievement is the involvement, dedication, response and leadership of the nursing workforce in the planning, preparation and delivery to address the COVID-19 Pandemic. Nurses were integral to the planning, training, delivery and post care for the COVID-19 vaccination plan, and COVID-19 response. Care and implementation went out into the community by strengthening the Puna system. Nurses were also integral in the decision making that occurred on resources and where the needs are. The nursing workforce continues to seek opportunities to continuously progress what it is to be a nurse, a Pasifika nurse, a Cook Islands nurse so that we can better care for our people.

#### 3.2 Across the board

- **Education and training.** After several reviews, many meetings, negotiations and consultations both in country and with external partners, the Cook Islands has established and secured the delivery of a Bachelor of Nursing Pacific Degree program to be delivered in the Cook Islands by Cook Islanders for the next 8 years. The program itself is a partnership between TMO, USP, WHO and Whitireia Polytechnic NZ. It is a NZ accredited program which will see our graduates become comprehensively trained NZ nurses with the addition of having a huge cultural context of the Cook Islands culture, people and health system.
- After many years, the Revision of the Nurses Act 1986 is also underway as well as the Revisiting of the functions of our Nursing Council. Redeveloping and updating the core functions of the Council (explain into a little bit more detail), updating the register and using technology to do this – online public register. This will assist in providing public confidence in the nursing profession. A specific plan to nursing workforce acknowledged by MoH - Cook Islands nursing strategy plan 2021 -2025
- Establishing and maintaining the partnership with SPC, in providing the scholarship for the postgraduate cert in critical and acute care. We continue to support the HSV – this where the ACLS,

PLS and other professional development/upskilling training is taken advantage of. Most recently, Nursing has been invited into the TMO executive table – part of the decision-making process/body. Able to advocate more for community and patient care. Career structure for nurses TMO 2019 – in summary, this document provides a guideline on how nurses can progress in terms of career and seniority as well as pay structure. These include things such as

- Pa Enea – Nurse Practitioner post graduate program who are then able to be autonomous in the Pa Enea where doctors are not readily available. NPs are the key providers of health in those areas.
- Outer Island upskilling, this is when the nurses from the Pa Enea are supported in their capacity and knowledge and are transferred back to Rarotonga for further development

#### **4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The will and dedication of the nursing workforce can only go so far and in order for this to become sustainable and achievable, a whole of Government approach and agency approach is required.

##### **4.1 Recommendations for governments:**

- To increase funding/invest in healthcare – this could be in attracting more young people to pursue a career in health, to retain current health workforce in terms of remuneration
- Continue to support the delivery of nursing education from an undergrad to post graduate training
- Recommend a leadership training course/mentorship

##### **4.2 Recommendations for development partners:**

- The nursing health workforce Cook Islands will continue to advocate and recommend that the structures, policies and training for specialised areas are needed.
- Post graduate online training from SPC to continue to provide more opportunity. This will enable the Cook Islands to become a self-sufficient country able to provide and grow and supply our own needs.
- Maintain relationships and support provided for Small Island Developing States (SIDS)