



# PACIFIC ISLANDS SURGEONS CONFERENCE

A gathering of Pacific communities was the biggest yet



**NIGEL WILLIS**

CHAIR, NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL BOARD

The Pacific Islands Surgeons Conference was held recently in Suva, Fiji, under the banner of the Pacific Islands Surgeons Association (PISA). With more than 70 attendees this was the largest of these biennial Pacific meetings to date. Indigenous surgeons and surgical Trainees from 10 Pacific Island nations were present – from the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The College Vice President David Watters, and, as Chair of the New Zealand National Board, I attended, along with several other surgeons and one surgical Trainee from New Zealand, Australia and Hong Kong.

These meetings provide one of the very few opportunities for continuing medical

education focused on surgery in the Pacific Islands. The program is organised and delivered predominantly by Pacific Islands' surgeons, with assistance when requested from New Zealand and Australian colleagues.

The 2014 meeting focused primarily on disaster response, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and surgical training. However, there were also opportunities to discuss the treatment of burns and limb trauma, for Pacific registrars to present their research papers and for participants to be informed about activities of Interplast and the TRIPP team.

Pacific Island countries are particularly prone to earthquakes, tsunamis and extreme weather events. The health consequences of these are a major concern for the countries themselves and for many international aid agencies. While the events cannot be controlled, pre-disaster planning and skilled local staff are key to organising and managing the immediate health

services response and thus mitigating and reducing the associated mortality and morbidity. Dr Douglas Pikacha from the Solomon Islands and Dr Petueli Emose from Samoa discussed the impact of recent disasters on their health services and the improvements that had been made or were to be made in their disaster plans. James Kong had travelled to Myanmar to assist after a cyclone and spoke on issues that had arisen several days after the disaster event.

Cancers are one of the major NCDs affecting Pacific Island countries and oncology was a major focus for this meeting. Oncology outcome data from Tonga, PNG, Samoa, Kiribati and Fiji was presented and discussed. A lack of the resources, taken for granted in New Zealand and Australia, combines with late presentations to result in high mortality rates. Surgeons in several of the Pacific Island nations are recording and reviewing their hospital's perioperative mortality,

and data from Tonga, Tuvalu and Fiji were presented for discussion. It was concerning to learn that, in some countries, they are not able to include in their data the work of visiting specialist teams.

The number of surgeons in Pacific Island countries is still very low by New Zealand and Australian standards. However, there has been a considerable increase in the past 15 years with graduates from the Fiji School of Medicine (now Fiji National University (FNU)) program joining those from the PNG programs. The majority of surgical services in Pacific Island countries are now provided by surgeons who have received most of their training through these programs. Continued growth of the workforce is important for the further development of surgical services in the Pacific Islands. Consequently FNU's 'postponement' of its post graduate surgical training programs is of considerable concern to Pacific Islands' surgeons, the Trainees who are part way through one of those programs, the young doctors who had hoped to join a program and to the countries who have lost access to this training option. That and other training and workforce matters generated considerable discussion. FNU has asked the College for assistance and the PISA supported the College acting on that FNU request and, in liaison with PISA members, seeking ways in which the surgical training programs could be re-instated as soon as possible.

The networks that develop from these meetings have led to new graduates of the Fiji program gaining placements in New Zealand or Australian hospitals to extend their experience before taking up consultant posts in the Pacific. Since this 2014 meeting a new placement opportunity has been identified in orthopaedics in Wellington and an existing orthopaedic placement in Christchurch may extend to provide some plastic surgery experience also.

**These meetings are also an opportunity for PISA to hold its General Meeting and to elect its Executive. The new Executive is:-**

**President:** Lord Viliami Tangi FRACS, Tonga  
**Vice President:** Ifereimi Waqainabete, Fiji  
**Secretary / Treasurer:** Richard Leona, Vanuatu  
**Immediate Past President:** Eddie McCaig FRACS, Fiji  
**Other Executive members:** Sireli Kaloucava, Fiji; Ikau Kevau, PNG; Saia Piukala, Tonga; Ponifasio Ponifasio, Samoa; and Deacon Teapa, Cook Islands  
**Trainee representatives:** Micky Siota (PNG programme) and Ronal Kumar (Fiji program)

Eddie McCaig FRACS and Alex Auld FRACS have been made life members of PISA. Eddie trained in medicine and orthopaedic surgery in New Zealand and

then returned to Fiji where he has worked for many years. In addition to his skill as a clinician, Dr McCaig has been an acknowledged leader within the surgical services in Fiji and has been Professor of Surgery and Head of Department for the Fiji School of Medicine / FNU postgraduate surgery training programs. He has been a forceful proponent for surgical training that produced graduates suited for practice in PICs, and was the inaugural President of the Pacific Islands Surgeons Association. Alex is an Australian paediatric surgeon who, over many years, has provided direct service in many Pacific Islands countries and has assisted with the training of many Pacific Islands surgeons.

The biennial Pacific meetings would not be possible without considerable financial and administrative support. NZAID has assisted since 1996 and funded the attendance of surgeons from eight Pacific countries to the 2014 meeting. Assistance also came from the PIP programme for two surgeons and from Strengthening Specialised Clinical Services in the Pacific (SSCSiP), which is funded by AusAid. College staff in the New Zealand Office and SSCSiP staff in Fiji provided the administrative support.

For any Fellows or Trainees interested in supporting this initiative, the next Pacific Islands Surgeons Conference will be in Samoa in 2016.