

Pohnpei Assessment for a Continuing Health Care Professional Development Program

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Abstract

In 2003, the University of Hawai'i Department of Family Medicine and Community Health entered a 4-year cooperative agreement with the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration to establish the "Pacific Association for Clinical Training" (PACT). PACT's goal is to develop effective distance education methods to improve the education and skills of health care professionals in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Island nations. To determine the situation existing in 2004, one of PACT's first projects was to perform site visits to each jurisdiction, conducting needs assessments through interviews with key healthcare professionals, hospital administrators, and government officials. This article highlights findings of PACT's Assessment of Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia. Meant to establish a baseline for future reference, all data are those collected in 2004/2005 and have not been updated.

Key words: Pohnpei; Clinical Training; Workforce Development; Distance Education. (PHD 2007 Vol 14 No 1 pp 63-66)

Pohnpei has a single hospital and seven dispensaries located on the main island with an additional five outer atoll dispensary sites.^{1,2} Pohnpei has 18 physicians, 83 nurses, five midwives, three dentists, 16 dental assistants, 31 extenders (health assistants, medex, community health workers), seven laboratory staff, five pharmacists or pharmacy techs, five radiology techs, and two other (dietitians, health inspectors, rehab or mental health) healthcare professionals. The distant atolls are served by boat and have limited communications with the main island.³

Introduction

This report was compiled from interviews and site visits performed by Drs. Tai-Ho Chen and Lee Buenconsejo-Lum in November 2003 and by these "Pacific Association for Clinical Training" (PACT) faculty and Dr. Gregory Maskarinec in June 2004. Additional information was obtained through ongoing communications with PACT partners on Pohnpei. A draft of this report was discussed at the November 2004 Advisory Board meeting and further review and revisions were offered by the Advisory Board members from Pohnpei.

Pohnpei State consists of a large volcanic island, Pohnpei, and six inhabited atolls. The population approaches 40,000 (in 2005), most residing on the main island, the land area of which makes up most of Pohnpei's 133 square miles. The estimated total outer atoll population is 2,500. The capital of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is located in Palikir on Pohnpei.

Health Workforce Training

Many of the physicians are graduates of the now-defunct Pacific Basin Medical Officer Training Program, which was based in Pohnpei from 1986 to 1996. Some have gone on to receive further specialty training at the Fiji School of Medicine. Other physicians have been trained in Papua, New Guinea.

Most of the nurses have been trained through the College of Nursing in the Marshall Islands. The Chief of Dentistry is a recent graduate of the dental program in Fiji. Much of the training for allied health staff has typically been informal on-the-job training.

A training program for health assistants has been initiated by two volunteer physicians from the hospital in conjunction with the Pohnpei State campus of the College of Micronesia, but has been hampered by limited instructional resources and faculty time constraints.

Current Continuing Professional Development Activities

Nurses are required to have 20 continuing education (CE) credit hours for licensed practical nurse (LPNs), 30 CE hours for graduate nurses, and specialty nurses are required to obtain 45 CE hours annually for license renewal. At present there are no formalized CE requirements for physicians, dentists, dental assistants, or other allied health staff in the FSM.

Teams of visiting specialists routinely give CE talks as part of their contribution. However, at present the local CE program is irregular. Many nurses use the annual American Pacific Nursing Leaders Council (APNLC) conference in order to obtain their licensure CE requirement. Oral health staff were aware of the Pacific Basin Dental Association video library located in Palau, but had not accessed this service. Lack of video viewing equipment was noted as one barrier. Pharmacy has no ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) training at this time, but recently four of the six pharmacy techs had undergone structured pharmacy tech courses through distance education from Alaska Pharmacy College via the University of Hawai'i. Some laboratory staff received out-of-country training funded by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other agencies.

Priority Continuing Professional Development Needs

Providing regularly scheduled CPD programs at the State Hospital would benefit both doctors and nurses. Good attendance among nurses would be expected to meet their CE licensure requirements.

Computer skills training, including both basic literacy and specific informatics training in order to take advantage of available resources like the WHO computer lab, would be helpful. Improved access to commercial health information resources such as full-text journals has been requested.

Possible Collaborations

Dr. John Hedson, has suggested a role for PACT in supporting the advocacy efforts of the Pacific Basin Medical Association (PBMA) in the region. One specific CPD issue the PBMA is working on is developing region-wide standards for CE for physicians.

College of Micronesia, FSM Campus

Spensin James, the Acting President of the College of Micronesia at the FSM Campus in Palikir, has expressed

interest in working with PACT on developing health training and computer training programs at the FSM and satellite state campuses of the College.

College of Micronesia, Pohnpei State Campus

A Health Assistant Training Program has been developed by volunteer faculty from Pohnpei State Hospital at this campus. They are short on resources such as instructional materials.

Lois Englberger, PhD, of the Island Food Community of Pohnpei, is an ethnobotanist who has studied the nutritional content of indigenous foods, focusing on carotenoid levels in an area where Vitamin A deficiency appears to be only a modern disease. PACT faculty discussed the possibility of producing informational posters for health staff and patient education on local food choices. Dr. Englberger has agreed to provide content for the PACT curricular library.

The Micronesian Seminar

Discussions with Fr. Francis X. Hezel, SJ, who has written extensively on social change in Micronesia,⁴ indicate several benefits of collaboration. Fr. Hezel has agreed to share his instructional materials for free access in the region. PACT could also benefit from the Micronesian Seminar's extensive experience in promoting health-related messages to populations in Micronesia through paper and broadcast media.

World Health Organization, Pacific Open Learning Health Network

The placement of a Pacific Open Learning Health Network (POLHN) computer lab in the Pohnpei State Hospital provides a powerful site for computer-based distance education. PACT staff are involved in ongoing discussions with the WHO regional office in Fiji that manages the POLHN program, to explore areas of potential collaboration and resource sharing.

Distance Education Technologies

Pohnpei has access to PEACESAT Pan-Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite audio and video broadcasts in the computer laboratory room, with marked technical problems. Success with using this for CPD programs has been mixed. The use of other distance education modalities such as telephone conferencing has also been challenging and expensive. A three-way telephone conference held at the June 2004 PBMA Conference in Pohnpei, linked a speaker in Fiji with conference participants in Pohnpei and Palau. Due to various technical coordination difficulties,

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the proposed one-hour session took almost 2 hours to complete at a cost of US\$700.

There is some use of an internet-based clinical referral system linked to the Pacific Islands Health Care Program at the Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu.

The WHO, through POLHN, funded a computer laboratory located at Pohnpei State Hospital. The WHO project covers the cost of internet access for the first year and the FSM government has committed to covering this leased line cost after the first year. There are 10 computers in the lab running on Windows XP Professional and sharing the 64 kbps line leased from FSM Telecom. The remaining computers throughout the hospital are not yet connected to a local area network (LAN). Currently there are dial-up connections at several locations, at the Secretary of the Administrator's desk, the medical supplies office, medical records and federal services. The FSM National Bioterrorism Program will expand the LAN network connections to other computers throughout the hospital, increasing the opportunities for electronic health information access.⁵

Limitations

Overall, no assessment was attempted to determine how many or what kind of health professionals are needed in the future to maintain and improve healthcare services in Pohnpei. None of the seven main islands or five outer island dispensaries were included in the PACT survey, hence the education needs of their staff remains unaddressed in this report. Additionally, with our focus on CE needs, no assessment was attempted to determine how many or what kind of health professionals are needed in the future to maintain and improve healthcare services in Pohnpei, although this should also be factored into CE recommendations.

Some respondents had difficulty ranking or prioritizing the various barriers or content areas. This occurred for several reasons such as, varied exposure or access to the different types of information, varied educational backgrounds and job duties. However, all uniformly agreed that additional training was essential for better healthcare.

Finally, the situation is a dynamic one, slowly changing; consequently, this report was outdated upon completion. However, it does establish a baseline for future comparison.

Summary

As the location of the capital of the FSM, Pohnpei

benefits from more reliable access to information technology than other FSM states. The potential for applying resources such as the WHO POLHN computer lab at the hospital is encouraging. With access to these resources, health workers should be encouraged and supported in developing their own local CPD materials and programs. PACT should look to provide support for the existing local programs that provide education for health workers. Despite the relative telecommunication advantages of Pohnpei, live communication by video or audio across the region remains problematic due to cost and reliability issues.

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