

Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership Scientific Workshop:

Opening Remarks: Stewart Jessamine

Madam Chair, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Health, I welcome everyone to this scientific workshop to discuss a Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership. May I extend a warm welcome particularly to our overseas colleagues: Dip Chand, Rifat Hossain, Mark Jacobs, Paul Jagels, and Rokho Kim.

The purpose of this workshop is to consider developing a Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership that builds capability and capacity within Pacific Island countries and territories, contributing to national and regional goals and objectives, and providing evidence for environmental health planning and policies.

I have seen the updated estimate of the global burden of disease attributable to environmental determinants of health, published just a few months ago. This reported that twenty-three percent of global deaths were attributable to environmental risks in 2012. It concluded that nearly a quarter of the global disease burden could be prevented by reducing environmental risks. Understandably, the paper concluded that eliminating hazards and reducing environmental risks will greatly benefit our health – and contribute to attaining the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This is a sobering background to this Workshop.

If we can work together, and develop partnerships to support evidence-based and relevant environmental health information, then we have some of the important tools to assess the risks from environmental exposures.

We can use this evidence to make sure our policies and programmes are protecting people from the most significant environmental health risks. We can see if our interventions are effective and we can see where we may need to do more work or do things differently. We can show our communities – and our funders – that we are providing programmes that protect the health of the most vulnerable people.

I am very pleased to see that we will be discussing this Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership in the context of agreed – or soon to be agreed - strategies, goals, frameworks, and plans. As one of the smaller member states in the WHO, I know the effort needed to meet the myriad of international commitments and requirements we try to deliver and have to report against. It is great to see you will be recognising and discussing existing commitments that provide the foundations for environmental health information.

I am also delighted to see several sessions focusing on how we can make this a true partnership and have a programme that is 'by Pacific peoples for Pacific peoples'. The proposal to develop an information platform with Pacific Island countries and territories, and support capacity and capability to use the information generated by the information is, to me, the best focus for this partnership.

I am pleased to see many of our Pacific Island colleagues will be joining us via skype. This is 'walking the talk' for reducing carbon emissions and may well be the way of the future...

I am also pleased to hear it is planned to consult with Pacific Island countries and territories, particularly those unable to be present, if this workshop confirms the scientific feasibility of the Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership. Building capability and capacity for data analysis and reporting is as important as the actual development of environmental health indicators.

The development and implementation of the Pacific Health and Environment Information Partnership is ambitious but exciting. I wish you all the best for your deliberations and discussions over the next two days.