



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Health and Ageing report:

Regional health issues jointly affecting Australia and the
South Pacific

JUNE 2013

Introduction

The inquiry into health issues affecting Australia and the South Pacific conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing culminated in the Committee's report entitled *Regional Health Issues Jointly Affecting Australia and the South Pacific* (the Report). The Report is an important document and the Government thanks the Committee and the various stakeholders for their valuable and thoughtful input to the Inquiry.

This response addresses the recommendations raised in the Report, and has been prepared by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), in collaboration with the Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and Queensland Health.

Australian Government Support for Addressing Health Issues Jointly Affecting Australia and the South Pacific:

The Australian Government takes cross border health issues very seriously, and has committed significant funding to a number of initiatives to address these health concerns. The Australian Government recognises that it must work in close partnership with our neighbours and the region more broadly in order to address health issues which affect us all.

Australia is a major donor to the health sector in the Pacific, working very closely with the governments of Pacific countries and other donors, primarily through our government-to-government programs. In 2011-12, Australia provided an estimated \$1155.9 million in total overseas development assistance (ODA) to PNG and the Pacific, with approximately \$180 million committed to improving health services in the region. Australian support aligns with national health strategies developed by Pacific island governments, with priorities for assistance outlined in Partnerships for Development with partner governments. Australia's Pacific regional aid program provides additional support by addressing common development issues and emerging concerns in non-communicable diseases and communicable diseases, and also by addressing constraints to health workforce capacity. Australia also funds the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which are active in the region.

Health is a priority area of Australia's Pacific Partnerships for Development with PNG and Solomon Islands, which are the focus of this report.

Cross Border Health issues Between Australia and PNG

The Australian Government provides significant support to address cross-border health issues in the Torres Strait. The Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC) was established in 2003 as a subcommittee of the Joint Advisory Council on the implementation of the Torres Strait Treaty. The HIC is chaired by the Department of Health and Ageing, and comprises Commonwealth agencies, Queensland government agencies, the Torres Strait Regional Authority, as well as PNG Government agencies. These agencies work together with the aim of strengthening the health service capacity in the Torres Strait and the Western Province of PNG, the province closest to the Torres Strait, and increasing the surveillance of communicable diseases in the treaty zone. The HIC also examines health issues associated with the free movement for traditional purposes of PNG nationals and Torres Strait Islanders (this free movement and the conditions on it do not include movement for the purpose of

accessing medical services), as enshrined in the Torres Strait Treaty, and looks at practical ways to address these health issues. The HIC meets twice per year, with its most recent meeting held on 30 April 2013.

In 2008, the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum tasked the HIC to develop a Joint Australia-PNG Package of Measures To Address Cross-Border Health Concerns (Package of Measures), which was presented to the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum in June 2009 as a draft. A report on the progress to date on the Package of Measures was presented to the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum in October 2011.

The Package of Measures aims to address these health issues, through:

- building health service capacity in the Western Province of PNG;
- improving communications and linkages across the international border in the Torres Strait; and
- extending and continuing health and related services for Torres Strait communities.

In 2009-10, the Australian Government through the Department of Health and Ageing committed \$13.8 million over four years to the Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy, which forms part of the Package of Measures.

Since 2008, AusAID has provided support for specific health activities in Western Province, including contributions to the Package of Measures and the emergency response to the cholera outbreak in late 2010. AusAID is also providing an initial \$11.8 million over four years (2011-12 to 2014-15) to support the Government of PNG to improve tuberculosis services and management in South Fly District of Western Province. This includes:

- health staff to improve tuberculosis services in Daru General Hospital and provide outreach to villages along the South Fly coast, including treaty villages;
- a sea ambulance to conduct monthly clinics and distribute medicine in villages along the South Fly coast, and support patient transfer to Daru Hospital;
- upgrading infrastructure at Daru General Hospital, including refurbishing an interim tuberculosis ward, building a communication centre, and a new tuberculosis ward;
- providing essential drugs;
- community awareness campaigns and training tuberculosis community treatment supporters;
- funding to Queensland Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory to enable testing and analysis of complex drug sensitive TB as this high level laboratory capacity doesn't currently exist in PNG; and
- x-ray and pathology equipment to support diagnosis and referral services at Daru Hospital.

In addition, at the request of the Government of PNG, AusAID has scoped the needs and costs of certain elements of the Package of Measures that the Government of PNG are responsible for, namely new health infrastructure in Daru General Hospital and clean water and sanitation to treaty villages along the coast. AusAID has committed \$21.1million (2013-14 to 2017-18) to

help improve health infrastructure at Daru Hospital and Mabaduan Health Centre, plus improve primary health care in Middle and South Fly Districts of Western Province.

Examples of some of the early achievements for the Package of Measures include:

- the capacity of Daru General Hospital to treat multi-drug resistant tuberculosis has been established and continues to be improved;
- Directly Observed Treatment Short-course (DOTS) treatment of sensitive tuberculosis has been implemented in Western Province. DOTS is recommended by the World Health Organization as best-practice for treating tuberculosis;
- clinical support and mentoring is being provided for clinical staff at the Daru General Hospital, and health staff in South Fly villages have been trained in microscopy techniques to improve diagnosis of tuberculosis;
- individual drug sensitivity testing is now being undertaken for Daru General Hospital by the Queensland Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory;
- Communications Officers have been appointed on both sides of the border to support improved surveillance, coordinate care and provide clinical and other communication linkages;
- a program to detect, control and eliminate exotic, disease-carrying mosquito species in the Torres Strait and Northern Cape York is established and continuing;
- a telephone/high frequency radio interface has been established to enable real time voice communications between health workers on both sides of the international border in the Torres Strait area; and
- facilitated cross border movements of health professionals and other government officials have been supported under protocols established by the Health Issues Committee. This makes it easier for health professionals and other officials to cross the border from non-declared ports. Such efforts are expected to positively contribute to better cooperation and communications in the Torres Strait area.

On 12 October 2012, the Commonwealth Government's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Baggoley, issued a statement that the approach being taken in Western Province will improve outcomes for communities in Daru and South Fly and will also better manage risks to Torres Strait communities.

On 30 October 2012, the PNG Government released an independent assessment of the risk of TB transmission in the Torres Strait relative to other diseases. The analysis found that TB is a major issue for PNG but the risk of drug resistant TB spreading to Australia from PNG, and becoming endemic remains low as long as contact amongst residents is of short duration and/or confined to outdoor activities. The report recommends expanding TB control throughout Western Province. AusAID's future assistance to support PNG to control TB will be guided by this risk assessment and annual independent monitoring by the WHO.

In November 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) undertook an assessment of Programmatic Management of TB in PNG. In terms of South Fly District of Western Province, the WHO review mission stated there is clear progress in TB prevention and control in South Fly since the last visit (October 2011). Furthermore, better diagnosis has led to a reported

increase in the number of patients notified with TB and MDR-TB, and MDR-TB patients have been promptly started on appropriate treatment, with promising results so far.

Australian Support to the Health Sector in PNG

Health is a key sector of Australia's aid program to PNG, as outlined in the PNG - Australia Partnership for Development. The Australian aid program provides support for strengthening PNG's national health system and implementing PNG's National Health Plan (2011-20), which focuses on strengthening primary health care. In 2011-12, Australia provided an estimated \$108.9 million in development assistance for health (including HIV/AIDS) in PNG. In 2012-13, expenditure is estimated at \$109.8 million.

Australia's support aims to reduce the number of women dying from pregnancy-related complications and children under five from preventable causes. The aid program supports the key functions of PNG's health system required to ensure health facilities can function, such as the procurement and distribution of essential drugs; training of health staff including midwives and community health workers; and refurbishment of rural health facilities and associated staff housing. In addition, Australia will provide a more intensive package of support to five agreed priority provinces (Eastern Highlands, Western Highlands, Milne Bay, Western and Autonomous Region of Bougainville) with a focus on demonstrating measurable outcomes and learning lessons to apply elsewhere.

Australian Support to the Health Sector in Solomon Islands

The Australian Government's support to the health sector in Solomon Islands aligns with the priority outcomes agreed under the Partnership for Development, which focus on improving health service delivery and accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals of reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Australia is the lead donor to the Solomon Islands health sector, contributing \$21.5 million to the sector in 2011-12, and an estimated 20 million in 2012-13.

Australia supports Solomon Islands to combat malaria through the Pacific Malaria Initiative, which aims to reduce the burden of malaria through prevention, disease management, and health system strengthening. The initiative focuses on the prevention and management of malaria and has achieved significant results. Malaria incidence in Solomon Islands in 2003 was 199 cases per thousand people. By 2011 malaria incidence had been reduced to 49 cases per thousand, a reduction of 75 per cent over eight years.

Responses

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate establish a parliamentary mentoring program between women in the Australian Parliament and women in Pacific Island Parliaments or aspiring female candidates.

A response to Recommendation 1 was tabled by the Presiding Officers in May 2010.

This is available at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=haa/reports.htm

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that collaborative research be undertaken into the sexual networks that exist in the Torres Strait Treaty zone, that includes the collection of data on the levels of Sexually Transmitted Infections, including HIV, on both sides of the border.

Agreed

The Australian Government recognises the importance of gathering data to better understand the extent and spread of HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) on both sides of the border.

Torres Strait

The Australian Government notes that:

- Queensland Health has primary carriage of health services related to sexual health issues that affect the Queensland region of the Torres Strait Treaty Zone;
- broadly, the collection of notification data on the diagnosis of STIs is enabled under Queensland's public health legislation and reported to the Department's National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS). However, the identification of cases from the Torres Strait Treaty Zone on the NNDSS is not currently available; and
- ethics approval for the collection of STI data in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone would be necessary and would need to take into account not only testing availability and reporting system mechanisms, but also follow up clinical care and treatment access.

Queensland Health has advised the Australian Government that considerable research is already being conducted within the Torres Strait on sexual health behaviours and STI prevalence by their Tropical Regional Services. Queensland Health acknowledges that there is currently insufficient information on these issues in the Western Province of PNG.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Health and Ageing, provides funding to increase the treatment and management of communicable diseases, including sexually transmissible infections and HIV, in the Torres Strait Treaty zone. It is possible that the increased treatment and management activity will provide a platform for future research in the Torres Strait Treaty zone about sexual networks in the region. The Australian Government is also funding the Queensland Department of Health to develop, implement and evaluate a culturally appropriate sexual health education campaign for the Torres Strait.

In addition, the Australian Government currently provides approximately \$9 million per annum to four national research centres to undertake strategic blood-borne virus and STI research, including sexual behaviour research within the Australian population context.

Funding mechanisms for future research into sexual networks could also be explored through existing streams, including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC).

PNG

Information about the HIV epidemic in PNG has gradually been improving, but there remain important knowledge gaps. For example, the national surveillance system is being extended to rural areas, but reporting is inconsistent and data quality is poor. The PNG epidemic is assumed to be sexually-driven, yet just over one third of all recorded HIV infections lack information about the mode of transmission (for example, in 2010, 43 per cent of recorded infections lacked transmission information, down from 83 per cent in 2003). There is also a lack of comprehensive information on age, sex, and province of origin, although data collection is gradually improving. The critical need for reliable information on local needs and whether the response is having an impact is only increased by growing awareness that the epidemic is being experienced differently in different parts of the country. Where information on the epidemic is available, there remains a challenge in utilising it effectively. For example, research conducted on drivers of the epidemic, such as sexual networking and violence against women, has yet to be fully translated into practical interventions.

Through the PNG-Australia Partnership for Development, both countries have committed to strengthening HIV data to guide the development of policy and program formulation in PNG.

The Australian aid program's *Responding to HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea* strategy prioritises the establishment of effective and efficient surveillance systems that will provide accurate measurement and understanding of the growth and other characteristics of the HIV epidemic in PNG.

Australia's National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (NCHECR) is currently providing technical assistance for the modelling of the HIV epidemic in PNG with AusAID's support. In addition, AusAID is funding the World Bank to conduct bio-behavioural surveys in PNG during 2011-13, including in Western Province. In addition, through a grant provided under AusAID's Australian Development Research Awards (ADRA) program the University of Queensland has conducted research into male circumcision and vaginal microbicides and implications for HIV prevention.

Global surveillance of HIV, AIDS and STIs is a joint responsibility of UNAIDS and WHO. At the country level in PNG, the role of development partners is predominantly to support the provision of guidance, tools and technical assistance. The national authorities, including the

PNG National Department of Health, the National AIDS Council, the National Research Institute, and the Institute of Medical Research, are responsible for local research, surveillance and analysis. Australia also supports these national partners through funding and technical assistance. Australia will encourage the PNG Government to undertake more work in this regard.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian government facilitate forums for leaders in the region to come together at regular intervals to discuss HIV/AIDS prevention strategies, and, in particular, to seek ways to lessen the social stigma of talking about the disease.

Agreed

The Australian Government agrees that there should be forums to facilitate discussion of HIV/AIDS prevention strategies in ways that lessen the social stigma of talking about the disease. The Australian Government will utilise existing forums for this purpose, in particular, the biennial Meeting of Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries and the Pacific Senior Health Officials Network.

A bipartisan Parliamentary Liaison Group for HIV/AIDS, blood-borne viruses (BBVs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) has been re-established by the Parliament of Australia. Comprised of interested Members of Parliament, the group has been actively seeking training and information so they can work with their colleagues in the Pacific. This will help them develop methods to deal with HIV/AIDS and other BBVs in ways that also address social stigma and discrimination.

HIV prevention and response is recognised as a priority issue under the Pacific Plan, endorsed by Forum Leaders in 2005 to respond to regional challenges. The Australian Government, through AusAID, provides support for ministers and senior officials in the region to meet to discuss prevention and response strategies for HIV and other health challenges. The Australian Government will continue to support this important dialogue.

The Australian Government also supports the Asia Pacific Business Coalition on AIDS (APBCA), which is a direct response to the need for greater private sector engagement and coordination in the regional fight against HIV/AIDS. It was launched by former President Clinton in February 2006. The APBCA Board of Directors is drawn from some of the world's major companies including the Chair, Peter Carroll (Ansell Ltd).

APBCA played a key role in the establishment of the PNG Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS, launched in January 2007. By increasing private sector attention on the growing regional HIV epidemic, APBCA promotes and coordinates standardised HIV workplace programs in businesses of the Asia-Pacific.

In 2010 Australia contributed nearly half a million dollars to the Global Commission on HIV and the Law convened by UNDP to clarify how legal protection can improve access to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support. The Commission has conducted regional dialogues

on the legal response to HIV including the Asia and the Pacific Regional Dialogue in 2011 attended by Commissioners, former Justice Michael Kirby and Dame Carol Kidu, previously Minister for Community Development and Leader of the Opposition in PNG.

Australia also supports exchange of information and sharing of experience through regional HIV conferences such as:

- The International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP). Held biennially, the ICCAP provides an opportunity for government leaders to come together with health professionals, the private sector and civil society organisations to share information on HIV in the region. The 10th ICAAP was held in Busan, Republic of Korea in August 2011.
- The Australian Society of HIV Medicine (ASHM). The ASHM conference is held every year in Australia and has a focus on the Pacific and PNG. The 24th annual conference was held in Melbourne in October 2012. This year the conference will be held in Darwin in October 2013.
- AIDS 2014. The International AIDS Conference is the world's most attended conference on HIV and AIDS. It is held biennially and Melbourne has been selected to host this conference in July 2014.

Australia also partners with the UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Asia and the Pacific to support regional civil society networks such as the Asia Pacific Network of People Living with HIV.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Australian government work together with the Australian state and territory governments to establish a reinspection program of installed water tanks, in dengue affected areas in Australia.

Agreed

The Australian Government agrees in principle with the recommendation, and notes that inspection/reinspection and treatment programs for mosquito control are the responsibility of individual states and territories. The Department of Health and Ageing already provides funding to Queensland for mosquito control activities in the Torres Strait.

Mosquito control is generally the responsibility of individual states or territories. In Australia, dengue fever outbreaks have only occurred in northern Queensland to date as the mosquito vector, *Aedes aegypti*, is currently restricted to this area.

The Australian Government has provided funding to Queensland for mosquito control operations in the Torres Strait since 2005-06. The operations include six-monthly inspection/reinspection and treatment of water tanks over the period of the program which is currently due to end in 2013.

Queensland has regulations relating to the prevention of mosquito breeding in rainwater tanks. The requirements for rain water tanks are contained in the *Public Health Regulation 2005*. This legislation includes requirements for construction, installation and maintenance of tanks.

The Environmental Health Committee, a subcommittee of the Australian Health Protection Committee, has produced a guidance document, *Guidance on use of rainwater tanks*, as a result of increased interest in using domestic rainwater tanks in both rural and urban areas. This guidance has been recently reviewed and covers mosquito breeding issues associated with rain water tanks. All jurisdictions are represented on the Environmental Health Committee.

The Australian Government monitors dengue fever and other mosquito-borne diseases through the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System. It also seeks advice from the National Arbovirus and Malaria Advisory Committee in relation to the risks it presents, and appropriate responses at a national and jurisdictional level.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Australian government partner with non-government organisations and communities to find nutritional solutions that promote healthy eating and redress malnutrition, in affected areas in the Torres Strait and Papua New Guinea.

Agreed

The Australian Government recognises that poor nutrition is a significant and growing problem in the Torres Strait and PNG.

Torres Strait

The Australian Government funds a number of initiatives contributing to promoting healthy living and eating in the Torres Strait.

The Department of Health and Ageing provides funding for the provision of health services to support people in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsular Area (NPA) region. This includes funding to support a range of diabetes/nutrition education programs, horticultural (backyard garden) and related chronic disease management care planning activities delivered by Queensland Health and the NPA Family and Community Services Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation.

Through the Local Community Campaigns to Promote Better Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program, *Imparja* Television has been funded to undertake a healthy living road-show for children and to produce a new set of Community Service Announcements and resources to promote healthy lifestyles. *Imparja* Television services a number of regions in the Northern Territory and Queensland including the Torres Strait.

The Torres Strait Islander Media Association has been funded under this program to develop and hold 1-2 day Dance Kombat sessions on each of the Outer Torres Strait Islands to encourage positive lifestyle choices in the areas of nutrition and physical activity. Dance Kombat days are accompanied by a Health Promotion Worker and a broadcaster who reports live from each community, profiling participants and good spokespeople for healthy behaviours.

Radio spots also promote the campaign. Community people undertake training to become Dance Kombat instructors.

The Australian Government also provides funding to the Queensland Government for a Regional Tackling Smoking and Healthy Lifestyle Team in the Torres Strait as part of a network of new health promotion teams across 57 regions nationally. Teams work with communities to develop local approaches to reduce smoking rates, improve nutrition and physical activity levels through social marketing campaigns, locally relevant programs and community events.

Queensland Government also undertakes relevant activities in the region which include:

- partnering with the Islander Board of Industry and Service to increase the promotion, availability, quality and affordability of healthy food in island stores; and
- funding the implementation and evaluation of a health promotion demonstration project to achieve healthy weight in children and young people on Badu Island in Torres Strait.

PNG

The Australian Government is currently working with a number of non-government organisations with proven records in effective service delivery capacity in PNG, including in nutrition to help promote healthy eating and redress malnutrition. For example, the Government supports the Clinton Foundation, which provides nutritional supplements to households affected by HIV in the highlands region and Port Moresby. The Government also supports CARE Australia, which works in rural areas in PNG to support communities in fish farming and to assist community schools to develop gardens for a range of crops in the Eastern Highlands province. Non-government organisations accredited with AusAID can apply for funding for work in nutrition in PNG through the AusAID Non-government Organisation Cooperation Program.

The Australian Government supports the United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF) in PNG, providing \$457,000 (2010-11 to 2011-12) towards its health activities in country. UNICEF provides technical support to the PNG National Department of Health to reduce malnutrition in children under five years of age through the promotion of breastfeeding and supplementary feeding.

A set of assessments commissioned by AusAID in the Eastern Highlands, Western Highlands and Milne Bay during November-December 2011, and Western Province and Autonomous Region of Bougainville in February 2012, identified nutrition and stunting as significant issues, particularly in certain districts. AusAID is now working with each province to identify locally appropriate solutions to addressing nutrition, including consideration of contracting organisations such as World Vision to implement programs such as the '1000 day' nutrition program (which targets children in their first thousand days before stunting impacts become irreversible). Formal service agreements have been developed, and will be followed by competitive grants for non-government organisations. In Western Highlands, AusAID will target support for nutrition in Jimi district, where one in every two children is malnourished.

World Vision is also implementing a number of projects related to nutrition in PNG through the AusAID NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Australian government encourage and support further institutional partnerships and/or reciprocal exchanges between the School of Medical and Health Sciences at the University of Papua New Guinea and Australian universities.

Agreed

The School of Medical and Health Sciences (SMHS) at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) has a number of arrangements in place with tertiary institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. These relationships cover exchanges of staff for short-term institutional and research strengthening deployments, as well as the exchange of information for research purposes. UPNG now directly manages contracting and partnering with organisations such as the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, which represents an important transition and allows UPNG to manage these partnerships directly. The Australian Government also provides core funding to the SMHS. From March 2009 to December 2012 a total of \$8.7 million was provided to assist the delivery of health worker training and specialised medical services through SMHS. The next phase of support to SMHS is currently being developed.

Separately, the Australian Government has provided funding to support the PNG National Research Institute, which is the body responsible for research on health issues. From 2008 to 2012 this assistance totalled \$851,521.

Australian universities have previously been supported under the Pacific Public Sector Linkages Program, a competitive funding grants program which aims to build capacity in Pacific partner governments and regional organisations through institutional partnerships between Australian and Pacific public sector agencies. From 2013 this program will be replaced by the Government Partnerships for Development. The Government Partnerships for Development will facilitate partnerships between Australian public sector organisations and their developing country counterparts to enable exchange of skills, experience and knowledge in support of Australia's objectives as outlined in the Comprehensive Aid Policy Framework. Public Universities will be eligible to apply for funding under this new program.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Australian government make efforts to link Igat Hope with counterpart organisations in Australia to strengthen their advocacy potential.

Agreed

The Australian Government has provided direct assistance to Igat Hope (approximately \$490,000 in 2011 and 2012), as well as support for linkages with counterpart organisations in Australia.

Igat Hope has had a long and enduring relationship with Australia's National Association of People Living With HIV/AIDS (NAPWA). NAPWA supported Igat Hope's creation in 2003 and since then has provided ongoing technical assistance around treatment advocacy, organisational development, governance and the building of a national People Living with HIV network within PNG.

NAPWA received grant funding from AusAID of \$600,000 from 2005-08 under the AusAID HIV/AIDS Partnership Initiative for capacity building and institutional strengthening of the Secretariat and the Board of Igat Hope. Through the PNG-Australia HIV and AIDS Program, NAPWA received \$181,700 for activity funding in 2011 and will receive a total of \$165,640 in 2012.

AusAID is considering alternate mechanisms to support Igat Hope's capacity building activities from 2013, such as through AusAID's volunteer programs.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Australian government consider establishing a contact point within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or AusAID to provide community organisations in Australia with basic information on the suitability of their intended donations to countries in our region.

Noted

AusAID provides basic information to the public on donations in times of disasters through its website.

The Australian aid program does not manage public donations directly and refers potential donors to the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) for information and advice on the suitability of intended donations. ACFID can discuss with potential donors and link offers of donations with the most appropriate NGO.

Past experience has shown that transporting goods and equipment to overseas countries may not be economically viable owing to high transport costs, import requirements, possible import duties, port storage/distribution costs and other logistical issues. The availability of adequately trained staff to use and maintain equipment is also frequently problematic. Furthermore, under

the Australian Government's development cooperation program, our strategies are to strengthen partner governments' own systems, including for procurement. Donations such as textbooks and medical equipment also need to comply with the country's standards and systems.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Australian government support additional health communications officer positions in the Torres Strait and treaty villages of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

Agreed

The Australian Government recognises the importance of communication between the Torres Strait and Western Province on clinical health issues.

The Australian Government has funded two health communications officers, one located in Queensland and the other in Western Province of PNG, since 2009. The role of the communications officers is to gather clinical and surveillance data on PNG nationals diagnosed and treated at Queensland Health facilities and share cross border clinical and disease surveillance information.

The funding for these positions is part of the Package of Measures which aims to strengthen health service capacity and improve surveillance and communications in both Western Province and the Torres Strait. The Department of Health and Ageing is providing funding of \$700,000 to Queensland Health over four years (2009-10 to 2012-13) for the Torres Strait Communications Officer. This funding has been continued in the 2013-14 Budget to 2016-17 for this purpose. The Western Province Communications Officer was funded through AusAID (\$205,000 over the period 2008-11).

In recognition of closure of the tuberculosis clinics in the Torres Strait in mid-2011, and following consultation with the Western Provincial Government and the Government of PNG, the role of the communications officer in Western Province was amalgamated into the new post of tuberculosis Medical Officer, supported by a (non-clinical) border communications administrative officer in Western Province. Both of these positions are funded by AusAID.

With AusAID support, a communications centre has been established at Daru Hospital to support patient management, including referrals. This was completed in December 2011. A communication protocol is currently being finalised for use between PNG and Queensland Health clinicians on both sides of the border for both general patient and tuberculosis patient communications.

In 2013, a new Border Health Liaison Officer position for Western Province has been recruited to facilitate communication between Daru General Hospital and Queensland Health. This position is also funded by AusAID.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Australian government install additional rainwater tanks in treaty villages in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

Agreed

The Australian Government recognises that clean water supplies, when combined with sanitation and good hygiene behaviour, are essential to the maintenance of good health in communities and to prevent the spread of water-borne diseases.

Community water supply for treaty villages was included as part of the Package of Measures, to be funded by the Government of PNG. The PNG Government's planned Rural Water and Sanitation Program in Treaty Villages Project aimed to work towards the provision of individual household tanks and latrines accompanied by a health promotion strategy to improve hygiene, over a five-year period. The Torres Strait Regional Authority had agreed to provide technical and project support based on its experience implementing similar water infrastructure projects in the Torres Strait. However this work has stalled, largely due to the Government of PNG not allocating the required funding.

In November 2010, the Government of PNG asked for AusAID's assistance in the design of a water and sanitation project for South Fly District. AusAID conducted a needs assessment for improving water supply, sanitation and hygiene in May 2011. The Government of PNG (Western Provincial Government and the National Department of Health) and other partners have since established a Provincial Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion (WASH) Committee, which reports to the Western Province Health Steering Committee.

In August 2012, this committee finalised a WASH plan for the province, with support from technical expertise provided by AusAID. With the highest rainfall in PNG, rainwater harvesting is the recommended water source in Western Province, however alternative sources are likely to be required during the dry season. The Western Province WASH Plan includes WASH technical assistance to ensure water and sanitation systems are sound, funding to attract NGOs with WASH experience to the province, development of a common approach for changing hygiene behaviours, and emphasises the importance of community consultation.

The funding and implementation of this plan will be done in conjunction with the Government of PNG, the Western Provincial Government and other development partners including AusAID.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that any new health facility that the Australian government helps construct should provide for staff accommodation and ongoing maintenance, in consultation and partnership with the local community.

Agreed

Following the review of the PNG-Australia Development Cooperation Treaty in 2010, the Australian and PNG Governments have refocused the Australian aid program to PNG, with health as one of the four key sectors.

The health infrastructure needs of PNG are significant. The Governments of Australia and PNG recognise that to attract and retain health staff in both urban and rural areas, decent infrastructure needs to be provided for them to work and live in.

Since 2010 AusAID has supported construction of 15 hospital wards and ten specialist wards/clinics, 12 health aid posts, accommodation for 99 single nurses and 69 staff houses.

Through the aid program, over the next six years the Australian Government has plans to rehabilitate health facilities and associated staff housing in eight provinces of PNG, in partnership with the Asian Development Bank. This will include construction of 32 new community health posts, refurbishment of 128 health centres and housing for 224 staff. Health centres, community health posts and related staff housing will be built or rehabilitated to PNG National Department of Health minimum standards, with running water, renewable energy and toilets. This infrastructure development will be done in partnership with the relevant provincial governments, who will be made aware of the full costs of building and maintaining infrastructure prior to work commencing.

The responsibility for the ongoing maintenance of infrastructure remains principally that of the Government of PNG. The Australian Government will continue to advocate for provincial governments to include funding for infrastructure maintenance in their budgets, and is planning to trial a kina-for-kina approach to increase the PNG Government's commitment to improving health infrastructure.

In Western Province, AusAID has committed to fund the Middle and South Fly Health Development Program, in partnership with the Ok Tedi Fly River Development Program, PNG Sustainable Development Program and PNG Government. This will include rehabilitation of selected priority infrastructure for rural health services.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the Australian government, in conjunction with the Papua New Guinean government, facilitate more creative and inclusive forums in which locals on both sides of the treaty zone border can engage on health and other treaty related issues with each other and with government officials of both nations.

Agreed

The Australian Government agrees that it is important to facilitate inclusive forums which allow government officials and locals from both sides of the border to engage on treaty-related issues. This is reflected in the already comprehensive annual calendar of bilateral meetings covering a wide range of Torres Strait Treaty-related issues. At present these meetings include:

- Joint Advisory Council (JAC) on the Torres Strait Treaty: bilateral meeting co-chaired by Australia and PNG. These are held annually, in PNG or Australia in alternate years. The recommendations and outcomes of a range of meetings are presented to the JAC for consideration. The JAC is attended by Australia, PNG, Queensland, Western Province and traditional inhabitant representatives.
- Traditional Inhabitants Meeting: co-chaired by traditional leaders from PNG and Australia. These are held annually, in PNG or Australia in alternate years. Outcomes are reported to the JAC and feed into the Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee. Government officials from Australia and Papua New Guinea attend this meeting in an advisory capacity.
- Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC): a bilateral meeting chaired by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. This is held twice a year in Cairns. Outcomes are reported to the JAC. The meeting is attended by Government officers from PNG, Western Province, Australia and Queensland.
- Environment Management Committee (EMC): co-chaired by the PNG and Australian environment departments. This is held annually, prior to the JAC. Bilateral working groups also meet on an ad hoc basis and report to the EMC. The EMC is attended by Australian and PNG environmental and fisheries officials, the DFAT Torres Strait Treaty Liaison Officer, the PNG Government's Border Liaison Officer, and the Torres Strait Regional Authority.
- Bilateral Fisheries Management Meeting: the shared fisheries resources lie wholly within the Torres Strait Treaty Protected Zone. Meetings are held annually, in PNG or Australia in alternate years. Outcomes are reported to the JAC. The Fisheries Meeting is attended by scientific, customs, fisheries and environment officials from Australia and PNG, the DFAT Torres Strait Treaty Liaison Officer, industry representatives, Western Province Administration and traditional representatives.
- Interdepartmental Committee Meetings: involve all relevant Australian and Queensland agencies. This is held at least twice a year to discuss Treaty-related implementation issues and to coordinate whole-of-government approaches. Issues discussed recently include arrangements to allow facilitated cross border movements for certain government officials and health professionals.

- Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area Health Partnership provides a forum for key stakeholders to monitor and provide strategic advice on the delivery of health care services in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula area. It includes community representation on matters affecting the health and well-being of the people of the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area.
- Meetings between community leaders and Western Province Health Division are held in South Fly District to allow two way discussions on health services.

In addition to attending all these meetings, the DFAT Torres Strait Treaty Liaison Officer undertakes regular visits to all treaty villages, accompanied by the PNG Government's Border Liaison Officer and officials from Australia and PNG. During these visits, the visiting officials discuss a range of Treaty-related matters with the villagers and hear from them about any concerns they may have. Combined with the regular meetings as outlined above, these Treaty village visits provide frequent and regular opportunities for the people of the Torres Strait region to discuss Treaty-related issues with each other and with Australian and PNG Government officials.

The large number of Treaty-related meetings already place substantial resource pressure on the PNG government at all levels. These pressures mean it is often difficult for PNG village-level, provincial and national government officials to attend. The Treaty-related meetings and the Liaison Visits provide a full range of creative and inclusive forums. The introduction of additional forums would exacerbate these pressures.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the Australian government encourage and support further institutional partnerships, including reciprocal exchanges between Department of Health staff in the Solomon Islands and Australian institutions (such as hospitals, universities and laboratories), including the provision of training at the National Referral Hospital.

Agreed

Improving health outcomes is a key focus of the Solomon Islands–Australia Partnership for Development. Australia supports Solomon Islands Government leadership of the health sector, and the health priorities identified in the *Solomon Islands National Health Strategic Plan 2011-2015*. Priorities include: malaria; childhood illnesses, including measles and other immunisation programs; non communicable diseases; and health system strengthening.

Institutional links between the two countries are currently supported in a number of ways.

The Pacific Senior Health Officials' Network, managed by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA), facilitates ongoing communication between CEOs/Secretaries from Ministries of Health in the Pacific, including Solomon Islands, with the aim of promoting better health systems governance and the development and implementation of sound and effective health policies in the region. DOHA provides the Secretariat for this Network.

Australian scholarships, including Australian Leadership Awards Fellowships, contribute to establishing and strengthening institutional links. Since 2011, seven participants from Solomon Islands have received Leadership Awards Fellowships in paediatrics and midwifery, building links with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the process. Australian institutions can also apply to AusAID for support for Solomon Islands representatives to participate in international seminars.

The long-running AusAID-funded "Pacific Islands Project", implemented by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, provides specialised clinical services to Pacific counterpart health services, through its visiting volunteer teams. It offers training for hospital staff, which builds professional links between health personnel from Australia, New Zealand and Pacific island countries.

Australia also supports St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney and the National Referral Hospital in Honiara to enable referral of treatment for selected non-terminal Solomon Island patients who meet clinical criteria to be referred to St. Vincent's for treatment.

Australia supports technical exchanges and institutional partnerships between Australian malaria research institutions and the Solomon Islands malaria program through the Pacific Malaria Initiative.

Consideration of any further support for institutional links between Australian and Solomon Islands health institutions, such as reciprocal exchanges, would need to be given priority by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services to ensure it is demand-driven and has a high degree of ownership.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Australian government support education programs about diabetes prevention and nutrition in the Torres Strait, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, in areas where diabetes and nutrition are problematic.

Agreed

Torres Strait

The Australian Government provides funding for the provision of health services in the Torres Strait. This includes funding to support a range of diabetes/nutrition education programs. Specialist Outreach Services that are available throughout the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsular district include a range of diabetes specialists and allied health professionals.

The Australian Government is funding the Queensland Government on an ongoing basis to implement a range of primary health care and maternal and child health programs. The funding supports diabetes management, chronic disease and health promotion activities. The provision of health services uses a multi-disciplinary approach and includes education and health promotion, early detection/ health checks, care planning and integrated case management. The program is run through primary health care centres, including on the outer islands and on an outreach basis from Thursday Island.

The Australian Government funded *Quality Assurance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Medical Services program* provides a culturally appropriate and clinically effective diabetes management service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the use of on-site point-of-care pathology testing for haemoglobin A1c and urine albumin: creatinine ratio.

Locations in the Torres Strait are eligible to participate in this program, although there are none participating at present.

The Australian Government provides funding to the Queensland Government for a Regional Tackling Smoking and Healthy Lifestyle Team in the Torres Strait, as referred to in the response to Recommendation 5.

Queensland Department of Health, with contributions from the Australian Government, has developed a diabetes prevention program for Indigenous Queenslanders, the *Living Strong* program. Delivery of the program in the Torres Strait is currently limited by lack of suitable staff. Recruitment of staff has been hindered by lack of suitable accommodation.

Solomon Islands and PNG

AusAID funds education programs to support diabetes prevention and nutrition in Solomon Islands and other Pacific islands.

At the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in August 2011, the Prime Minister announced that Australia will provide \$25 million in new assistance over four years to address non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the Pacific. Through this commitment, AusAID is helping to tackle NCDs in the Pacific through supporting Pacific countries to develop long term health financing strategies which prioritise the costs of meeting the MDGs while including appropriate and affordable approaches to NCDs. AusAID provides grant funding and technical assistance, through the World Health Organization and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, for the development and implementation of evidence-based national strategies to reduce the major chronic disease risk factors: poor nutrition, physical inactivity, smoking and harmful use of alcohol. Prevention and management of diabetes was a central aspect of this program.

In Solomon Islands, the Regional NCD program supports the implementation of the National Nutrition and Health Lifestyle Plan which included local initiatives to encourage the production and consumption of local foods. The Australian government also provides bilateral assistance for health promotion activities aimed at preventing diabetes and other non-communicable diseases in Solomon Islands, through the Health Sector Support Program.

AusAID is supporting the PNG Government to promote healthy lifestyles through implementation of PNG's National Health Plan (2011-20), which prioritises strategies to reduce the morbidity and mortality of non-communicable diseases.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that a mentoring program (especially for women) be established that matches senior bureaucrats, in the Australian Department of Health and Australian health facilities with senior bureaucrats in the Solomon Islands Department of Health.

Agreed

The Australian Government notes that there are existing mechanisms to support mentoring of senior officers from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the mentoring of women health officials in particular.

The Australian Government currently supports regular interaction between senior health officials in Australia and Pacific Island countries, including Solomon Islands. The Department of Health and Ageing has long standing professional links with senior bureaucrats in Pacific Island countries through the Pacific Senior Health Officials' Network (PSHON), which was established in 2004. The PSHON currently receives funding support from AusAID's Pacific Public Sector Linkages Program (to December 2013, with an application for renewed funding currently under consideration by AusAID).

PSHON facilitates communication between senior health officials, including those from Solomon Islands, with the aim of supporting health system governance and the development and implementation of sound and effective health policies within the region. The network promotes a partnership and technical exchanges between health officials through a partnerships initiative and middle managers program. The Department also brings together members of the PSHON annually for a collegial networking meeting to build leadership and discuss common issues related to development of the public health sector.

The PSHON Secretariat works to ensure that there is a gender balance in all PSHON activities, and encourages Pacific countries to nominate the equal participation of men and women in all activities. The Secretariat reports that it has observed a general increase in representation of women at senior and middle management levels in the Pacific Ministries of Health.

Outside of the PSHON, the Department of Health and Ageing engages with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services through relevant regional fora including the World Health Organization Regional Committee for the Western Pacific and the Meeting of Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries. The Australian Government is committed to building the capacity of Pacific Health Ministries, including promoting the meaningful involvement of women at all levels.

