

## Elimination goals in the Pacific Islands: A consortium of Pacific Island physicians takes the lead.

July 2023: Alice Lee and Thomas Russell

The Pacific region is broadly classified into three ethnogeographic groupings of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia that is comprised of 22 Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs), which is home to over 12.7 million people [1]. The region spans over 800,000 square kilometers of land mass with an ocean expanse that is equivalent to 15% of the earth's surface [2]. PICTs vary in land size, geography, and population from the relatively small Pitcairn islands (population 50) to the larger volcanic islands of Papua New Guinea (population 9.3 million), Fiji (population 901,603) and Solomon Islands (population 744,407) [1]. In order of decreasing population size, Vanuatu, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Samoa, Guam, Kiribati, The Federated States of Micronesia, Tonga, American Samoa, Northern Marianas, Marshall Islands, Palau, Cook Islands, Nauru, Wallis and Futuna, Tuvalu, Niue, and Tokelau round up and complete the group.

All are classified as low to middle income and face similar challenges in health care delivery. Funding support for health systems is sought offshore through donor partners and non-government organizations to meet the essential service requirements. The addition of new health programs generally requires close scrutiny and rationalization. Some of the highest prevalence rates of hepatitis B are seen in PICTs with variation within the region. In response to the elimination goals, and with the support of increased awareness (World Hepatitis Day), advocacy for hepatitis B needs have been met with great success in some of the islands. Hepatitis B treatment guidelines have been endorsed, tenofovir added to the essential medicines list, patients screened and treated in Kiribati, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea. Despite the interruption from COVID pandemic, the programs have persisted and are now being reinvigorated. Challenges in introducing such programs have been met with a resolve from the local team to find locally appropriate solutions to ensure optimal care whilst considering inclusivity (with a test and treat approach where needed) and funding/resource restrictions. Niue has completed an entire country screening for hepatitis B and C and all the eight identified hepatitis B patients have been linked to care [3]. Kiribati has screened over 20,000 patients including screening in the remote outer islands with rates of 15% consistently seen [4]. Further high rates of co-infection with hepatitis D have not been addressed [5]. PNG is now ready to start the third site for treatment roll out (prevalence of 15% or more are also reported).

Treatment guidelines have been contextualized for locally available resources, models of care delivery have been established (including test and treat for patients in areas of high prevalence whereby they are counselled and offered treatment based on a positive HBsAg only) and healthcare worker training rolled out. Monitoring and evaluation has been a real challenge with significant limitations identified. Program support through telehealth has ensured that local teams are well supported.

Small numbers of patients, limited resources, small orders for supplies including drugs and health care personnel have meant that a collaborative Pacific wide approach is being explored to improve efficiency and outcomes. Pooled procurement, training, sharing experiences and learning from the challenges will be recorded as part of implementation research. A consortium of local physicians will implement prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) program in a systematic manner throughout the countries where tenofovir is available.

As we celebrate another world hepatitis day, we look forward to welcoming the Pacific group and partnering with them towards the common goal of elimination. This will only be possible with the support of the global community.

1. The Pacific Community (SPC). *Pacific Community Results Report 2021*. 2022. (Accessed online 19 July 2023). <https://www.spc.int/about-us>
2. The World Bank. *The World Bank in Pacific Islands*. 2023. (Accessed online 19 July 2023). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview>
3. World Health Organization (WHO). *Harnessing the Covid-19 pandemic to eliminate viral hepatitis in Niue*. 2023. (Accessed online 19 July 2023). <https://www.who.int/niue/news/feature-stories/detail/harnessing-the-covid-19-pandemic-to-eliminate-viral-hepatitis-in-niue>
4. National Hepatitis Program. *Hepatitis program Zero Survey outreach report 2018 – 2022*. 2023. Ministry of Health & Medical Services (MHMS), Kiribati.
5. Jackson K, Tekoaua R, Holgate T, Edwards R, Yuen L, Lee A, Nicholson S, Littlejohn M, Locarnini S, Tuneti K. *Hepatitis B and D in the Pacific Islands of Kiribati*. *J Clin Virol*. 2020 Aug; 129:104527. doi: 10.1016/j.jcv.2020.104527. Epub 2020 Jun 29. PMID: 32645613.