

INSIGHTS



INSIGHTS is the monthly research newsletter of the College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences of FNU, providing updates in research activities conducted by its staff, students and those under the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research.

OCTOBER 2025 ISSUE 1



Insights

- Welcome
- Celebrating Excellence
- Fiji's CDRC Celebrates Launch
- Research to Focus on Health Response to Gender Based Violence
- PhD Candidates Testimonials
- Staff Researcher Highlight

About the Cover Photo
Hon Penioni Ravunawa, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services

Welcome Message



Dr. Donald Wilson
Associate Dean Research CMNHS
Director Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR)

Welcome to the very first edition of “Insights”, the monthly research newsletter of the College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences of FNU, providing updates in research activities conducted by its staff, students and under the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research”.

I’m truly grateful to have this opportunity to connect with you and share the meaningful work that our College is engaged in, towards improving health across Fiji and the Pacific. Each month, the newsletter will bring you important updates on student and staff research projects, research training activities, community engagements, and research events that reflect our ongoing commitment to research excellence for the ultimate benefit of the people and communities we serve.

For this first issue, I’m especially proud to share that the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS) 2025 was hosted in Suva for the first time on September 10-12, to coincide with the 140th Anniversary celebration of the Fiji School of Medicine (now College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences). We were honoured to have the Honourable Penioni Ravunawa, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services, Fiji, as our Chief Guest. A proud alumnus of the Fiji School of Medicine, his presence highlighted the legacy of FSMed graduates who have gone on to lead and shape health systems in Fiji and across the Pacific.

We are grateful to the 325 participants who attended PIHRS 2025, from across the Pacific, alongside colleagues from Australia, New Zealand, and beyond. A highlight for us every year is the active involvement of current students and early researchers, who bring fresh ideas, new energy, and a glimpse of the next generation of Pacific researchers. I must also thank the 175 staff of FNU (mostly CMNHS) who registered and attended the Symposium. Vinaka vakalevu colleagues!

Until next month, do follow our Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research page on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61573882786738> for news, events and research updates.

Vinaka Vakalevu

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE: PIHRS DRIVES HEALTH SOLUTIONS FOR A STRONGER PACIFIC



2025 PACIFIC ISLANDS HEALTH RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM



The annual **Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS)** concluded its 3-day conference on September 12, reinforcing its role as a vital platform for advancing health solutions across the region. This year's event, themed **"Celebrating Research Excellence in the Pacific,"** brought together health researchers, practitioners, students, and academics from across the Pacific and beyond.

A Legacy of Local Research Leadership

Since its inception in 2011, PIHRS has evolved into a premier event for the Fiji National University (FNU), particularly its College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS). It serves as a crucial platform for CMNHS staff and students to showcase their research, reflecting FNU's commitment to strengthening the academic community's research capacity and profile.

This year's symposium held special significance, coinciding with the commemoration of 140 years since the founding of the Fiji School of Medicine, now a proud part of CMNHS.

The 3-day conference facilitated deep discussions on key sub-themes including;

- Non-communicable and communicable diseases
- Surveillance, Health systems and policy
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Planetary health, Women's Health, Child Health, and Mental Health
- Food and Nutrition
- Medical and Nursing Education
- RHD and Cancers

A Call for Action and Regional Growth

Opening the symposium was the Assistant Minister for Health, the Honourable Penioni Ravunawa who emphasised the

event's timeliness as the Pacific navigates ongoing, re-emerging, and new health challenges. "This year's theme promises to showcase the existing high-calibre research expertise, as well as the new generation of researchers who are being nurtured and mentored to become health research leaders for Fiji and the region," Honourable Ravunawa said. He stressed the need to **increase the volume of health research and expertise** to improve the region's performance against Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health & Well-being.

Echoing this focus on regional leadership, **CMNHS Communicable Diseases Research Centre Adjunct Professor, Phillip Hill**, highlighted the tangible results of FNU's recent research initiatives.

"Without the recognition and investment in Pacific researchers, research will always be driven and dominated by outsiders," Professor Hill noted. He advocated for a collaborative model, guided by "Pacific relationality," that enables local researchers to grow in excellence and **lead the Pacific contribution to the global research agenda**.

From Data Exchange to Tangible Policy

FNU Pro Vice-Chancellor Learning & Teaching, Professor Jimaima Lako, reminded participants that PIHRS must be more than just an exchange of data. She encouraged attendees to ensure that the networks formed and ideas shared lead to tangible actions that improve the health and wellbeing of communities across generations.

Professor Lako highlighted the scope of the discussions: "Over the three days, we will hear more than 90 presentations and 5 major panel discussions on issues that matter deeply to our region: HIV and communicable diseases, antimicrobial resistance, planetary health, non-communicable diseases, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and the strengthening of our health systems."

She extended special recognition to partners like the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, regional organisations, technical agencies, and academic collaborators for their vital support, which makes the symposium possible.

From community-based innovations to groundbreaking data on regional health challenges, the Symposium stood as a testament to the strength and resilience of Pacific voices in research. A heartfelt thank you to everyone who presented, shared their findings, and actively participated. **Together, we continue to strengthen research for a healthier Pacific.**

THE 2025 PACIFIC ISLANDS
HEALTH RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM
WAS PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY





RISE Project Manager Autiko Tela (Standing) with members of the CDRC team

FIJI'S CDRC CELEBRATES LAUNCH OF CUTTING EDGE LABORATORY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Communicable Disease Research Centre (CDRC) at Fiji National University's Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR) has officially launched the SENAITE Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS), marking a major leap forward in Fiji's scientific research capabilities.

"This has been a long-held dream finally becoming reality," shared Isireli Koroituku, Research Fellow at CDRC. "Implementing a LIMS at our Serology Research Lab is a landmark achievement for us."

CDRC has played a crucial role in the 'Population-based Age-Stratified Assessment of SARS-CoV-2 Seropositivity (PASS) in Fiji' project, a collaboration funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and supported by New Zealand's University of Otago and University of Auckland. Now that the PASS project has concluded, its valuable serology data has been successfully migrated into the new SENAITE system.

The first week post-launch has seen impressive results:

- 157 samples from PASS studies registered, encompassing 411 tests in total
- 55 samples (222 tests) fully completed with results entered into the system
- Hands-on training and migration support provided to seven key staff members by Monika Lal from Beyond Essential Systems (BES)



Beyond Essential Systems has been instrumental in training PASS project staff, the FNU Project Manager, CDRC Research Fellow, and the Laboratory Manager from the Watershed Interventions for Systems Health in Fiji (WISH) project.

SENAITE is already transforming laboratory workflows. "It's user-friendly and significantly reduces workload - no more juggling multiple Excel sheets," said Cagi Naina, a Laboratory Technician on the PASS project. "Time management has improved noticeably compared to the previous system."

Dr. Donald Wilson, Associate Dean Research at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences, praised the milestone: "I'm proud of this achievement by CDRC and FIPHR. A heartfelt thank you to Monika and the BES team for their expertise and support."

With SENAITE now fully operational, CDRC is gearing up for upcoming research on Arbovirus and Emerging Virus Infections (AEVI) and HPV studies. The new system promises enhanced data quality, security, and accessibility, positioning Fiji at the forefront of global health research.

The success of this initiative also owes thanks to partners including NARALABS, LIMS Engineering & Consulting, Sahar E., Mark Hunt, and the Australian High Commission in Fiji.

This milestone signals an exciting chapter for Fiji's research community, as innovation meets collaboration to tackle health challenges head-on.

RESEARCH TO FOCUS ON HEALTH RESPONSE TO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE



Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global public health problem with a global prevalence of 30%. It has significant and long-lasting impacts on physical and mental health.

It is also a significant concern in the Pacific where 68 per cent of women having reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. In the Pacific, access to healthcare services among persons experiencing GBV is marred by unacceptable inequality and inequity that are strongly linked to the social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental conditions that individuals face.

The 'Strengthening Pacific Women's Access to Health and Safety Project', or the SPACE Project, is managed by the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR) with the Pacific Society for Reproductive Health (PSRH) and St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne

SPACE Project is funded by the Pacific Community (SPC) through the Pacific Women Lead (PWL) programme and technically supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

The SPACE Project has two main components – research and capacity development. The SPACE Research is currently carrying seeking to understand the Health Response to GBV in Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

The study will be gathering information from Health Care Workers who tend to those experiencing GBV, as well as persons who had used a health service because of GBV in these countries. The research seeks out health departments that are likely to be accessed by those experiencing GBV.

To ensure a diverse representation, these departments are selected from Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary health facilities from all geographical divisions in these countries



Due to the sensitive nature of the activity, SPACE Project ensures close collaboration and strict ethical assurances with respective national stakeholders and Ministries of Health. The study has begun in Fiji before it cascades to Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Tonga.

Veilomani Training



Under the SPACE Capacity Development, the Veilomani Training Programme caters for Pacific Health Care Workers and community advocates. The SPACE Veilomani Training offers a Certificate of Attendance as continuing Professional Development.

There are no entry requirements and attended through weekly lunch time zoom sessions.

The programme also offers a Certificate of Attainment that is given by CNMHS. The minimum entry requirement is a successful completion of Fiji Year 13 studies or equivalent and at least one year of work experience in healthcare.

These are weekly live sessions, accessed through the Moodle Forum and assessments are moderated as per regulations available at FNU and the College. Since the inception of the SPACE Veilomani Training, 336 participants from all over the Pacific have registered for the training.

PhD CANDIDATE TESTIMONIALS



Dr Mohammed Imtishal
PhD Candidate
FNU

My PhD research focuses on Postpartum Family Planning (PPFP), Interpregnancy Intervals (IPI), and Maternal Nutrition in Fiji. I am exploring how birth spacing and family planning choices influence maternal health, nutrition, and child wellbeing, with the goal of strengthening evidence to support healthier families in Fiji and the Pacific. Having recently completed my candidature confirmation, I am excited to continue this journey and work closely with communities and health professionals to ensure my research findings can be translated into real improvements in maternal and child health services.

I currently serve as the General Manager at Ba Hospital, where my passion lies in improving healthcare systems, staff engagement, and patient-centered care. This professional background has shaped my research interests, as I believe strongly in connecting evidence with practice. Looking ahead, I hope to contribute both academically and practically to building stronger, healthier communities in Fiji through a combination of research, leadership, and collaboration.

Currently, I am a full-time Obstetrics and Gynecology Specialist at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital. Having worked as an Obstetrician and Gynecologist for over a decade, I have recognized the importance of specialized Obstetrics services in Fiji.

My current PhD research focuses on "Congenital fetal anomalies and preconception care at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital."

This research is a landmark mixed-method study that aims to identify the prevalence of congenital fetal anomalies, assess current diagnostic and management capabilities, and explore parents' experiences when faced with a congenital birth defect. This study will initiate innovative solutions to revolutionize preconception care and fetal scanning services, ultimately helping to deliver patient-centered specialized care to families of newborns managed for congenital birth defects.



Dr. Nitik Ram
MBBS (Hons), MMed
(O&G), MBA
PhD Candidate
FNU

STAFF RESEARCHER HIGHLIGHTS



Dr. Eunice Okyere, Assistant Professor in Public Health at Fiji National University, is an accomplished researcher and educator with extensive experience in teaching and supervising student research projects. Her research interests span a wide range of public health areas, including women's health, maternal and child health, health systems, rural development, human nutrition, education and communicable and non-communicable diseases. She has also developed a growing interest in HIV research, focusing on understanding social, behavioural, and system-level factors that influence the disease outcome and health equity. Her collaborative work spans Africa, Europe, Australia, and the Asia-Pacific region, partnering with universities, health institutions, and both governmental and non-governmental organizations. She has successfully led and co-led several funded research projects and contributed to multiple research grants and scholarship awards.

Dr. Okyere's teaching philosophy is grounded in student-centered

learning, with a strong emphasis on critical thinking, practical application, and mentorship. She believes that teaching public health should empower students to use research evidence to solve real-world problems. Her classroom approach encourages active learning, collaboration, and reflection, nurturing students to become analytical and compassionate public health professionals capable of influencing change in their communities.

Dr Eunice Okyere is currently the principal investigator for an ongoing HIV project titled "Factors affecting HIV Treatment in Fiji: Enablers, Barriers and Possible Interventions". The study explores the experiences of HIV patients from diagnosis to treatment, with a focus on understanding the factors that influence treatment adherence and the challenges patients face when accessing care. It also includes the perspectives of healthcare workers and community leaders on HIV management, stigma, and existing interventions. By gathering insights from patients, healthcare workers, and stakeholders, the research seeks to develop evidence-based strategies to strengthen HIV programs, reduce stigma, and enhance adherence to treatment. The findings are expected to support policymakers and health managers in designing effective public health interventions to reduce HIV transmission in Fiji. The study is anticipated to be completed next year.



LAUGHTER BOOSTS THE
IMMUNE SYSTEM.
LAUGHING INCREASES THE
PRODUCTION OF
ANTIBODIES AND
ACTIVATES IMMUNE CELLS,
HELPING THE BODY FIGHT
OFF ILLNESSES ...

I GUESS LAUGHTER REALLY
IS THE BEST MEDICINE!

Thank you for your time - we would love to hear from you.
For comments, suggestions or article contributions
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