

“Researching Today, Transforming Pacific Health”



Fiji Urged to Turn Health Research into Action

Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium 2026 was held at the FNU Nasinu Campus on August 3. Photo: Luke Salababa

By Wati Talebula

Fiji cannot afford to keep producing health research that ends in reports it must translate evidence into decisions that improve the lives of people in communities.

That was one of the strongest messages emerging from the 2026 Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS), where researchers, government representatives, traditional leaders and other stakeholders came together to confront some of Fiji’s most pressing health challenges.

PIHRS 2026 Chair and Acting Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Dr Donald Wilson, said the symposium had reached a turning point, moving beyond an annual gathering for presenting research to becoming a platform where evidence could influence policy and government action.

“We stopped treating this as an annual event and started this year as a four-year commitment to accelerating the health SDGs,” Dr Wilson said.

The shift comes as Fiji continues to face complex health challenges, including non-communicable diseases, HIV, gender-based violence, tuberculosis, childhood obesity and gaps in health information systems.

While significant research is being conducted in Fiji and across the Pacific, Dr Wilson said the real challenge was ensuring that evidence did not remain within academic circles.

“A symposium that ends in applause changes nothing,” Dr Wilson added.

The 2026 symposium was therefore designed to produce practical outputs that could continue beyond the event.

Four dedicated research-to-policy dialogues focusing on gender-based violence, tuberculosis, childhood obesity and Indigenous genomics, with each dialogue concluding with a written and agreed outcome.

The gender-based violence dialogue was among the most significant, bringing together the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, representatives of the Great Council of Chiefs, researchers and other stakeholders.

Dr Wilson further stated that the discussion did not shy away from difficult questions about Fiji’s national response to violence against women.

It concluded with a Call to Action that is now being circulated among participants for consensus and is expected to reach Cabinet through the Deputy Prime Minister, who had made the commitment when officially opening PIHRS.

The tuberculosis dialogue similarly provided an opportunity for stakeholders to openly examine declining treatment outcomes following the transition from Global Fund support to national ownership.

For Dr Wilson, these discussions demonstrate

what can happen when researchers and decision-makers are placed in the same room. “What that tells me is that the appetite is not for another conference.”

“Major health research priority Pacific countries should invest in now,” he said.

He said Fiji and other Pacific Island countries risk, having important health realities hidden within broader Asia-Pacific statistics.

“When our numbers are rolled into the regional average, local health emergencies are diluted and hard-won national successes vanish,” he emphasised.

The issue extends beyond the availability of data to the people and systems responsible for producing it.

Dr Wilson pointed to weaknesses in clinical coding and the lack of dedicated professional capacity to ensure health information remains accurate as staff move through government systems.

He also warned that data could be technically correct but still fail to reflect realities on the ground.

“A country can look adequately supplied on surgeons per hundred thousand population when there is one surgeon on the island, and sometimes none”.

“Numbers without context are not evidence.” he said.

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The symposium also reinforced the need for Fiji to strengthen Pacific-led research and data sovereignty.

Dr Wilson said Pacific communities had historically been the subjects of research, while samples, data and research outputs often left the region.

“Samples left these islands, data left these islands, and papers were published elsewhere, about us, without us,” he said.

He said the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR), now positioned within Fiji National University’s Office of Research and Innovation, has an important role in changing that model.

The aim, he said, should not simply be to increase the number of research publications but to ensure Pacific researchers are setting the research questions, retaining ownership of data and influencing decisions.

“The test is not whether we publish,” Dr Wilson said.

“It is whether Pacific researchers are setting the questions, holding the data, and being heard when the decisions are made.”

Close to 400 participants attended PIHRS 2026, including senior government representatives, researchers, health professionals, traditional leaders, church representatives, police, corrections officers, prosecutors and women’s organisations.

Dr Wilson said the diversity of participants was more important than the number itself.

The symposium also provided opportunities for emerging researchers, with FNU staff and students presenting alongside senior researchers from across the region.

Writing intensives were held to help researchers develop manuscripts, concept notes, research proposals and grant applications, while students and young leaders were given opportunities to participate in policy discussions.

Dr Wilson said this was essential for building the next generation of Pacific researchers.

Looking towards 2029, PIHRS aims to establish consistent country reporting that allows Pacific nations to measure progress from year to year and identify

gaps openly.

The original four-year framework focused primarily on Sustainable Development Goal 3 — good health and well-being — but that approach is now being broadened following discussions at this year’s symposium.

Dr Wilson said health could not be separated from other development priorities, including housing, education, food, gender, climate, water and sanitation.

“If we look only at Goal 3, we will produce a partial picture of health because we miss the coverage of health initiatives that come under other SDGs,” he said.

The change means future PIHRS programmes will explicitly invite research linked to other Sustainable Development Goals that affect health, while also making space for issues that are not adequately captured by global indicators, including Pacific culture, traditional knowledge, mobility, community resilience and ocean-centred wellbeing.

For Fiji, the challenge now is to ensure the momentum generated by the symposium continues beyond the lecture theatres and

conference rooms.

Dr Wilson said the Pacific already has researchers capable of producing world-class science, including genomic research being conducted in Fiji to trace tuberculosis transmission and monitor antimicrobial resistance.

The priority is to ensure that knowledge is translated into action.

“Everything else depends on this,” Dr Wilson said of strengthening health information systems.

“You cannot target prevention you cannot measure; you cannot hold a system accountable for a number it does not have, and you cannot make a case to a finance ministry without evidence.”

For Dr Wilson, the greatest optimism lies in the growing willingness across Fiji and the Pacific to have difficult conversations, challenge assumptions and accept correction.

“A sector that can argue honestly and stay in the room is a sector capable of changing direction,” he said.



University of Auckland Associate Professor Jichao Zhao with Aryan Ram, showcasing his Vision Language Model.
Photo: Romeka Kumari

Vision Language Models to Address Radiologist Shortage

By ROMEKA KUMARI

A pioneering application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to medical imaging could help address the shortage of radiologists across Pacific Island Countries (PICs), with a Vision Language Model (VLM) for X-ray interpretation.

The device was showcased at the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium at the Fiji National University (FNU) Nasinu Campus earlier this month.

University of Auckland Associate Professor Jichao Zhao, who is leading the development of the AI model, said the technology had the potential to improve access to timely X-ray interpretation in resource-limited healthcare settings.

“The Pacific is facing a significant shortage of radiologists, resulting in delays in X-ray interpretation and, ultimately, affecting patient outcomes,” Associate Professor Zhao said.

He explained that the VLMs are AI models capable of interpreting medical images and generating clinical text, offering a potential solution to strengthen radiology capacity in the region.

“We have developed a validated VLM-based framework for automated X-ray reporting, specifically tailored to the needs of Pacific Island Countries.”

“The framework is being developed to support clinical decision-making, including applications related to heart surgery,” he said.

Associate Professor Zhao said the VLMs would initially be fine-tuned using publicly available X-ray datasets, alongside retrospective imaging datasets collected in Fiji and Samoa.

“Using local datasets is particularly important because it helps improve the model’s generalisability to Pacific populations,” he said.

The model’s performance will be assessed by clinicians based on the accuracy of its reports and their clinical usefulness. Local radiologists will also be involved in a clinician co-design process to refine the reporting structure and ensure the AI-generated outputs align with existing clinical workflows.

“Early clinician assessments indicate that the model performs particularly well in identifying diseases that are prevalent in the Pacific, including Tuberculosis and Rheumatic Heart Disease.”

“These preliminary findings demonstrate the value of combining publicly available data with local imaging data when adapting AI models for Pacific populations,” Associate Professor Zhao said.

However, he acknowledged that the research is still at an early stage, with limitations including relatively small datasets and the need for further statistical testing.

“Future research needs to focus on quantitative validation and clinical pilot studies to determine how these models can be safely integrated into real-world healthcare settings,” he said.

Associate Professor Zhao also highlighted the potential for international collaboration to support the development of AI-enabled medical technologies without placing significant financial burdens on Pacific health systems.

“Through international collaboration, we can develop these technologies at little or no cost to Pacific countries and potentially create other AI-based tools to address different health challenges facing the region,” he said.

He said the research could ultimately contribute to strengthening healthcare delivery across the Pacific by improving the adaptability of AI technologies to local needs.

Research Reveals Hidden Pathways of Gut Viruses



Alex Obeten presented his research at the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium.
Photo: Romeka Kumari

By ROMEKA KUMARI

New research into how viruses are transported within the human gut could provide valuable insights into disease transmission and environmental health across Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

Alex Obeten, originally from Nigeria and currently a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) student at the University of Sydney in Australia, presented his research at

the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium held at the Fiji National University (FNU) Nasinu Campus earlier this month.

His presentation, titled “Decoding Extracellular Vesicle-Mediated Encapsulation of Enveloped and Non-Enveloped Gut Viruses through Phosphatidylserine Affinity Profiling”, explored how viruses can be transported inside tiny biological structures known as extracellular vesicles (EVs).

Obeten is currently in Fiji working with the Watershed Interventions for Systems Health (WISH) Pacific Project, which focuses on understanding environmental and health risks affecting communities.

“In my research, we are using molecular ecology to link Fijian watersheds with environmental risk factors,” Obeten said.

He said the research was particularly important for rural communities, where waterborne and faecal-borne diseases remain a concern.

“There is evidence of significant transmission of waterborne and faecal-borne diseases in rural communities. Through WISH Pacific, we are looking at these issues from a systems-health

perspective, particularly how sanitation influences disease transmission,” he said.

Viruses are traditionally classified as either enveloped or non-enveloped, depending on whether they possess a lipid membrane. However, emerging evidence suggests that even non-enveloped viruses can be enclosed within extracellular vesicles, potentially changing how they survive, spread and evade the immune system.

Obeten’s study aimed to identify and characterise viruses encapsulated within EVs in the human gut and investigate their prevalence, diversity and potential functions.

“Our research team has used specialised laboratory techniques to isolate phosphatidylserine-positive particles from human stool-derived viral-like particles. Wethen used advanced imaging and metagenomic sequencing to identify and analyse the viruses.”

“The findings showed significant enrichment of enveloped viruses, while free non-enveloped viruses were reduced.

However, the EV-associated viral populations were dominated by non-enveloped viruses, with strong associations

identified with bacterial families including *Enterobacteriaceae* and *Bacteroidaceae*,” he explained.

He also mentioned the research could also contribute to future disease surveillance and therapeutic strategies, particularly as communicable diseases continue to pose challenges in the Pacific.

“Our findings challenge the traditional understanding of how viruses are classified and transmitted.”

“The way viruses interact with extracellular vesicles may have important implications for viral evolution, transmission and their impact on human health,” he stated.

Obeten added that the research was also being supported by laboratory capacity at FNU.

“We already have a laboratory established at FNU with qPCR equipment, and we are now moving towards sequencing samples collected from communities,” he added.

He said combining environmental sampling, molecular research and community-based data could strengthen understanding of health risks and support evidence-based solutions for Pacific communities.

Seeing Ability Beyond Disability

By ROMEKA KUMARI

For 39-year-old Joseph William Work, disability has never been a reason to give up on his dreams.

Instead, it has strengthened his determination to pursue education, build a better future for his family and inspire others living with disabilities to believe in their own abilities.

Joseph, who is originally from Kulukulu in Sigatoka and shares maternal links to Qalikarua Village in Matuku in the Lau Group, is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce, majoring in Management, and Industrial Relations, and Human Resource Management, at the Fiji National University (FNU) Nasinu Campus.

He joined FNU in Semester 2 last year, continuing what has been a remarkable journey of learning despite facing significant challenges in his life.

Joseph is fully visually impaired and also lives with a physical impairment resulting from a spinal injury caused by a stroke he suffered in 2017.

“I do not look at my disability as a limitation. I choose to look at what I am capable of doing and focus on my abilities instead of allowing my disabilities to define me,” Joseph said.

His journey with visual impairment began in 2017, the same year he joined the Republic of Fiji Military Forces as a electrician in the Regular Force.

“It started with blurry vision, which was

later linked to a brain tumour, eventually resulting in full visual impairment.”

“Losing my sight was not the end of my journey. It was a new chapter, and I had to learn how to live my life differently,” he revealed.

For many, such circumstances could have become an overwhelming barrier. For Joseph, they became another challenge to overcome.

“Life will always present challenges, but we should never allow those challenges to decide our future.”

“I always had the determination to pursue education which remained one of the strongest driving forces in my life,” he shared.

In 2010, Joseph graduated with a Diploma in Electrical Engineering from the then Fiji Institute of Technology, now known as FNU’S College of Engineering and Technical Vocational and Education and Training.

His thirst for knowledge did not stop there.

In April last year, he graduated with a Professional Diploma in Business Management from the University of the South Pacific.

Today, he is once again a student, proving that education can remain a powerful pathway to personal growth regardless of the circumstances one faces.

“I have always been eager to study. Education gives me purpose, and every

qualification I earn reminds me that I can achieve what I set my mind to,” he emphasised.

For Joseph, however, his educational journey is about becoming an example for others who may be facing similar challenges.

“I want people with disabilities to know that they should not give up on themselves. We may have different challenges, but we also have different abilities,” Joseph further stated.

“I believe society should look beyond disability and recognise the talents, potential and contributions of people living with different forms of disability.”

“Instead of asking what a person with a disability cannot do, we should ask what they can do and give them the opportunity to show it,” he said.

Behind Joseph’s determination is also his family, particularly his two children, son Arthur and daughter Emma.

“My children are my biggest motivation. I want them to see their father as someone who never gave up, no matter how difficult life became.”

“I want my children to understand that challenges are part of life, but giving up should never be an option,” he revealed.

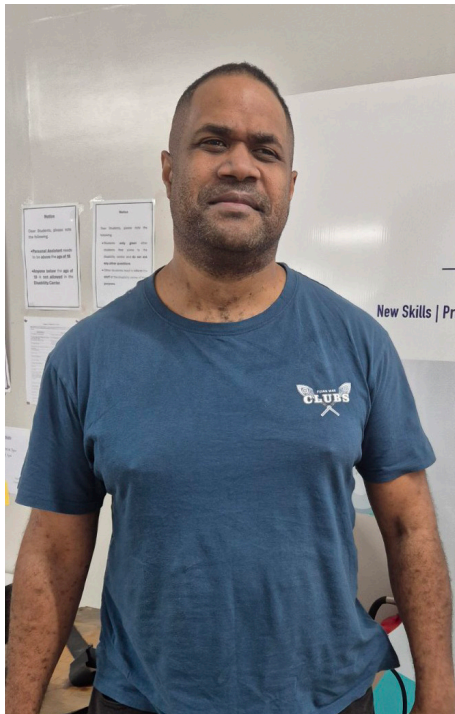
His journey from Corrections Officer to military personnel, from engineering graduate to business management graduate, and now to a Bachelor of Commerce student, reflects a life driven

by resilience and an unwavering eagerness to learn.

“My disability is part of my story, but it is not the whole story. My abilities, my education, my family and my determination are what define me.”

“If my journey can give hope to even one person living with a disability, then everything I have gone through has a greater purpose,” he added.

For Joseph, the journey continues, not defined by what he has lost, but inspired by what he can still achieve.



Joseph William Work
Photo: Romeka Kumari

FNU Counsellor Encourages Students to Speak Up and Seek Support this World Suicide Prevention Month

By Christal Kapoor

Every September, communities around the world unite to raise awareness about suicide prevention and remind people that hope, help and healing are always possible.

This year, World Suicide Prevention Month is being observed under the theme “Changing the Narrative on Suicide” with the call to action “Start the Conversation.” The campaign encourages individuals, families and communities to challenge stigma, promote understanding and create safe spaces where people feel comfortable seeking support.

For Fiji National University’s (FNU) Nasinu Campus Counsellor, Ms Kantha Mani, changing the narrative begins with replacing silence with compassion.

“The theme is a call to action about challenging harmful myths, reducing stigma and shifting from silence and misunderstanding to openness, empathy and support. We need to create environments where people feel able to speak up and seek help,” Ms Mani highlighted.

She said the message is particularly important for university students and young adults, who often navigate academic pressures, financial challenges, relationship difficulties and uncertainty about the future while trying to balance their personal and professional aspirations.

“They need openness, empathy and support, basically an environment where they feel able to speak up and seek help,” Ms Mani said.

One of the biggest barriers to suicide prevention, she explained, is the fear of talking about it. Many people worry that asking someone whether they are having suicidal thoughts may encourage those thoughts, but Ms Mani stressed that this is a dangerous misconception.

“Looking out for someone who may be struggling and asking if they are suicidal is an offer of support,” she said. “Showing empathy and validating their feelings is more likely to reduce distress rather than intensify it. Talking about suicidal thoughts does not increase their presence or occurrence. It means listening without judgement, offering support and guiding individuals towards help.”

Ms Mani encouraged students to be aware of warning signs that may indicate someone is in emotional distress. These can include talking about death, expressing feelings of hopelessness, guilt or being a burden, withdrawing from friends and loved ones, giving away treasured possessions, saying goodbye unexpectedly or engaging in risky behaviours.

“If you notice these signs, listen without judgement, validate their feelings, offer support and connect them with appropriate support services,” she advised

“It is also important to inform a trusted

person who is connected to the individual so they can receive additional support.” Ms Mani also encouraged students to take proactive steps to care for their mental wellbeing before challenges become overwhelming.

“Reach out to a trusted person, seek professional help when needed, manage your time effectively, stay focused on your goals and maintain healthy lifestyle habits,” she reiterated.

Students experiencing emotional distress or mental health challenges are encouraged to seek support through FNU’s Counselling Services, which are available across the University’s campuses. The service is free, confidential and non-judgemental, providing students with a safe and supportive environment where they can speak openly with a qualified counsellor and receive professional guidance.

Students can access the service by visiting or contacting the Student Support Services office on their respective campuses, where appointments can be arranged with a counsellor. Those who are unsure about reaching out are encouraged to take the first step by speaking to a trusted lecturer, friend or Student Support Services staff member, who can help connect them with the appropriate support.

Ms Mani emphasised that suicide prevention is a shared responsibility and that families, friends, lecturers, peers and the wider FNU community all have an

important role to play in creating a culture of care, compassion and belonging. As FNU joins the global community in observing World Suicide Prevention Month, she hopes every student remembers one simple but powerful message.

“You matter, and so does your mental health,”

“Taking time to reach out to someone in your community, a family member, friend, colleague or even a stranger could change the course of another person’s life,” Ms Mani said.

If you or someone you know is experiencing emotional distress or suicidal thoughts, immediate support is available by calling Fiji’s National Crisis Toll-Free Suicide Prevention Line on 1543.



Ms Kantha Mani.
Photo : Luke Salababa



Meli Nakauvadra Tanuku on his graduation day last year
Photo : Nicolette Chambers

By Christal Kapoor

For many students, university is where futures are shaped. For Fiji National University (FNU) Associate Counsellor Meli Nakauvadra Tanuku, it is also where his life’s purpose was discovered.

Once a student walking the corridors of FNU, Tanuku has returned to the University in a different capacity by helping students navigate life’s challenges while reminding them that seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Based at FNU’s Ratu Maivalili Katonivere Campus in Labasa, Tanuku’s journey is one of courage, service and personal growth.

Originally from the chiefly island of Bau, with maternal

The Power of One Conversation

links to Matailevu in Nalawa, Ra, he began his counselling journey in 2022 after completing a Diploma in Counselling at the University of the South Pacific. Inspired by the life-changing impact of meaningful conversations, he enrolled in FNU’s Bachelor of Arts in Counselling programme under the School of Education, making the bold decision to leave his previous employment and become a full-time student.

During his first year at the Natabua Campus, he was elected Student President, balancing the demands of representing students while maintaining his studies.

“Balancing student leadership with academic responsibilities taught me important lessons about accountability, resilience, patience and effective communication,”

“One of the most valuable lessons I gained was the importance of respecting and valuing people from all walks of life. These experiences strengthened my empathy and understanding and continue to influence the way I approach counselling and student wellbeing today,” Mr Tanuku said.

Returning to FNU as a counsellor carries special significance.

“I now have the opportunity to support students within the same institution that contributed significantly to my own personal, academic and professional development,” he said.

His passion for counselling stems from a simple yet powerful belief that being heard can change lives.

“I was inspired by the understanding that a simple conversation, when accompanied by active listening, empathy and genuine respect for another person’s experience, can have a significant impact,”

“Being listened to without judgement can help individuals feel valued, understood and supported,” Mr Tanuku explained.

As universities continue to place greater emphasis on student wellbeing, Tanuku hopes more students will recognise that asking for help demonstrates courage rather than weakness.

“Seeking support is not a sign of weakness; it is an indication of self-awareness, courage and a willingness to take positive steps towards one’s wellbeing,” he said. “Recognising when support is needed and having the courage to reach out can be an important part of personal growth and resilience,” he further added.

As Fiji joins the global observance of Suicide Prevention Month this September, Tanuku hopes every member of the FNU community will remember that support is always available before challenges become overwhelming.

“Seeking help should be viewed as a proactive step towards wellbeing, not something that should only happen when a person reaches a point of crisis,” he said.

“Sometimes, one conversation can be the beginning of a positive change. I encourage every student and member of the FNU community to reach out when support is needed, because your wellbeing matters, your story matters, and seeking help can be an important first step towards hope and healing,” Mr Tanuku reiterated.

Rethinking Healthcare from the Ground Up

Architect challenges Pacific to reimagine health infrastructure



Conway Begg, Principal of Conway Architects brought an innovative engineering and architectural perspective to the 2026 PIHRS. Photo : Vetaia Dakua

By Christal Kapoor

Healthcare is often measured by the expertise of its doctors, nurses and researchers. But according to renowned architect Conway Begg, the buildings in which care is delivered may be just as important.

Presenting at the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS) 2026, Mr Begg challenged delegates to rethink healthcare infrastructure, not simply as bricks and mortar, but as an essential part of the health system that influences patient outcomes, staff wellbeing and the resilience of communities across the Pacific.

Drawing on nearly four decades of experience in architecture, Mr Begg argued that healthcare facilities should do more than provide shelter. They should inspire healing, adapt to local environments and respond to the realities faced by Pacific Island communities.

“Architecture can inspire the delivery of healthcare,” Mr Begg said. “It can also contribute to wellbeing. In many ways, architecture itself can be medicinal.” he said.

Using Fiji as an example, Mr Begg questioned whether enough priority is being given to healthcare infrastructure compared with investments in other sectors.

“I believe in a healthy nation,” he said. “If we provide healthy services, we create productivity at the highest level,” Mr Begg added.

His presentation explored how climate-responsive architecture, sustainable materials and locally driven design could help transform healthcare delivery, particularly in rural and maritime communities where access to services remains a significant challenge.

Rather than relying solely on conventional building designs, Mr Begg proposed modular, timber-based health facilities that are affordable, environmentally sustainable and capable of being assembled quickly in remote locations. Powered by solar energy and incorporating solutions such as rainwater harvesting and reverse osmosis systems, the concept is designed to respond to the realities of Pacific Island life.

Following his presentation, Mr Begg explained that the concept was never intended to be viewed as a finished design.

“I’m not saying they should use that model,” he said. “It’s a concept, it’s an idea. It needs a bit of work. But the idea behind it is that it’s sustainable and adaptive to the conditions and the people,” he stated.

He noted that challenges such as access to clean water, transport and connectivity continue to affect many rural and maritime health facilities,

requirininfrastructure that is practical as well as resilient.

Mr Begg also encouraged greater collaboration between architects, engineers and healthcare professionals, believing institutions such as the Fiji National University (FNU) are uniquely positioned to drive innovative solutions.

“With institutions like FNU having a College of Engineering, we have an opportunity to contribute more to this dialogue. I think it’s high time we started pushing for this now,” he said.

Reflecting on almost 40 years in the profession, Mr Begg spoke passionately about the people working within Fiji’s healthcare system.

“Our people are getting smarter. Our people in public healthcare are brilliant assets.”

“But the places they work in are often not giving them the environment they deserve,” he said.

Throughout his presentation, he encouraged delegates to look beyond imported designs and instead develop facilities that embrace Pacific climates, cultures and communities.

“We tend to import foreign designs. There’s nothing wrong with that, but they need to be adapted. Pacific architects and engineers have the knowledge to create facilities that work for our people and our environment,” explained Mr Begg.

Mr Begg also called for the development of a long-term National Health Infrastructure Plan that is regularly reviewed, costed and maintained, ensuring healthcare facilities evolve alongside the country’s growing needs rather than waiting until critical failures occur.

His presentation resonated strongly with participants, prompting discussions on the condition of existing health facilities, the need for consistent infrastructure standards and the importance of designing spaces that support both patients and healthcare workers. Delegates agreed that stronger collaboration between the health sector, engineers, architects and policymakers will be essential in building resilient healthcare systems for the future.

Closing his presentation, Mr Begg reminded delegates that healthcare infrastructure is ultimately about people.

“Medical facilities matter because they shape the delivery of health services for every person in Fiji and every country represented here,” Mr Begg stated.

Mr Begg’s presentation served as a timely reminder that building healthier communities begins not only with medical innovation, but with creating environments where quality healthcare can truly thrive.

Young FNU Researchers Earn Top Honour for Climate Health Study



From Left – Noa Tawake, Reapi Seru and Taniela Raileqe with their spoils. Photo: Christal Kapoor

By Christal Kapoor

Three young Fiji National University (FNU)-affiliated researchers have proven that impactful research knows no age after taking home the *Best Oral Presentation Award in the Climate, Emergency, Environmental and Planetary Health category* at the 2026 Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS).

Representing the REFLECT Fiji Trial, Reapi Seru, Taniela Raileqe and Noa Tawake were recognised for their presentation on an innovative climate adaptation study exploring whether passive cooling interventions can reduce heat-related health risks in vulnerable communities.

Their presentation, titled “*REFLECT – Fiji Trial (Protocol)*”, outlines one of Fiji’s first large-scale randomised evaluations of cool roof technology. The study aims to recruit 400 households (800 adult participants) across seven rural communities in Tavua to examine how reflective roof coatings can help lower indoor temperatures and reduce heat-related health risks.

The project forms part of the global HEAT NEXUS initiative and will monitor changes in blood pressure, blood glucose (HbA1c), body temperature, indoor temperatures and self-reported health outcomes over a 12-month period.

For 28-year-old Reapi Seru, a Data Officer with the REFLECT Fiji Trial and an FNU Bachelor of Public Health graduate, the award came as a complete surprise.

“We didn’t expect to win.”

“We travelled from Tavua to Suva on Sunday, and our project manager selected the three of us to present. We prepared our notes and simply wanted to share our work. Winning was something we never expected,” Ms Seru said.

The recognition has further strengthened the trio’s passion for research and reinforced the important role young researchers play in addressing Fiji’s emerging public health challenges.

“This has really motivated us because research has always been our passion.”

“Research is the future. It provides the evidence needed for policy-making and helps create solutions that can improve people’s lives,” added Ms Seru.

Reflecting on her own career journey, Ms Seru admitted that research was not initially part of her plan.

“After graduating with a Bachelor of Public Health, I thought I would work in the Ministry of Health like many graduates.”

“I didn’t realise how broad public health really was. When I started working in research in 2022, it opened my eyes to so many opportunities. It inspired me to pursue a Postgraduate Diploma in Epidemiology, and since then research has become my passion,”she said.

She hopes more young Fijians, particularly iTaukei women, will consider careers in research.

“Many people don’t realise how many opportunities research offers,” Ms Seru stated. “It isn’t just about collecting data. It’s about creating evidence that shapes policies, improves communities and changes lives. I want more young women to study with the goal of making an impact,” emphasised Ms Seru.

Ms Seru also encouraged more students to consider studying public health, describing it as one of the most versatile career pathways available.

“Public health is broad, you can become a researcher, contribute to policy, work in hospitals, government or international organisations. There are so many ways you can make a difference,” she reiterated.

Professor Sims Urges Careful Selection of Literature for Children



Professor Margaret Sims presenting at the workshop.
Photo : Nicolette Chambers



Academics and students at the official opening of the inaugural Literature Teaching Workshop held at FNU’s Natabua Campus in Lautoka. Photo : Nicolette Chambers

By Nicolette Chambers

Professor Margaret Sims has urged academics over the careful selection of literature when presented to children.

The Macquarie University and FNU-CHEL (Fiji National University-College of Humanities, Education and Law) Adjunct Professor, made this comment while officiating at the inaugural Literature Teaching Workshop at the FNU’s Natabua Campus in Lautoka earlier this month.

Professor Sims noted that selecting literature for children should help them develop an understanding of the world while also supporting the knowledge, values and perspectives educators aim to nurture.

She said literature does not necessarily have to come from glossy, published books, but can also be found in the stories, experiences and knowledge shared by children, their families and communities.

“We want to give students experiences through literature that encourage them to think differently and see the world from different perspectives,” she highlighted.

“We also need to consider the emotional impact of the literature we provide to children. We want children to develop empathy, so we should expose them to a range of literature that offers perspectives of children living different lives and experiences. It allows them to consider: What does it feel like to be this particular child living in this world?”

Professor Sims added being an Early-Childhood-

Education academic, she used that as a foundation during the workshop to show teachers how they could take simple reading activities and create learning opportunities out of them for children of all different ages.

“We used practical activities to help the teachers and student teachers understand how literature can support children’s learning at different ages. For younger children, they drew and wrote about their favourite dogs, allowing them to begin connecting their own words with written symbols, while older students explored rhythm and poetry by working together to create rhyming poems,” she said.

The two-day workshop was hosted by the FNU’s School of Communication, Language and Literature, through the Office of the Dean, CHEL.

Future Teacher Veibataki Aims to Make Literature Engaging for Students

By Nicolette Chambers

For Nainasa Veibataki, her goal as a future teacher is to make literature more meaningful and engaging for her students.

Her comment follows the successful conclusion of the Literature Teaching Workshop that took place at the Fiji National University’s Natabua Campus in Lautoka earlier this month.

Veibataki is a third-year student pursuing a Bachelor of Secondary Education, majoring in English and iTaukei.

She shared that the inaugural workshop was an opportunity to gain practical strategies that she could use with her future students.

“I hope to gain the confidence to use effective teaching strategies, that will make literature lessons more engaging, interesting and meaningful for my students,” said Veibataki.

The Head of the School of Communication, Language and Literature, Ms Suzie Aziz, highlighted that the workshop encouraged educators to reflect on an important question: “How can literature be taught in ways that encourage students not only to read, but to experience, question and connect with texts, while discovering meaning through them?”

Ms Aziz added that educators must continue to adapt

their teaching approaches to meet the evolving needs of today’s learners, while ensuring that the richness, relevance and value of literature will continue to be preserved.

“We live in a rapidly changing educational landscape. Our learners are exposed to digital technologies, social media and different forms of communication from a very young age. Their expectations of learning are changing, and as educators, we need to think about how our teaching can respond while still preserving the value and richness of literature,” she added.

“Workshops such as this are particularly valuable because, as teachers and educators, we are lifelong learners. We learn from research and new teaching approaches, but we also learn from one another.”

Lecturer, Ms Sangeeta Jattan was privileged to be part of the two-day workshop, noting that it inspired her, after hearing about the many innovative ideas that could be created using story books.

“There are a lot of things for us to

take home, especially for the teachers, on how they can use books to create innovative and creative lesson plans for their students,” Ms Jattan said.



Nainasa Veibataki.
Photo: Nicolette Chambers

Listening Beyond the Diagnosis

Groundbreaking FNU research reveals the human stories behind Fiji's HIV epidemic



Dr Eunice Okyere after her presentation. Photo: Luke Salababa

By Christal Kapoor

When Fiji declared an HIV outbreak in 2025, the headlines focused on the numbers. Behind every statistic, however, was a person navigating fear, stigma and the daily realities of living with HIV.

Seeking to understand those lived experiences, researchers from Fiji National University’s (FNU) College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) have undertaken groundbreaking research that is helping reshape conversations around HIV care in Fiji.

Presented at the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS) 2026, the study, *“Lived Experiences of HIV-Positive Individuals in Fiji: Insight from the Health Belief Model,”* was led by Dr Eunice Okyere, alongside Dr Kissinger Marfoh, Dr Ramneek Goundar, Dr Filimone Raikanikoda and Ms Litia Makutu.

The research comes at a critical time. Fiji recorded 1,583 new HIV cases in 2024, followed by 1,226 additional cases in just the first half of 2025, prompting the declaration of a national HIV outbreak and most recently a national emergency.

“Much of the evidence presented on HIV in Fiji describes the scale and progression of the epidemic. Our research asks a different question: how do people living with HIV experience their condition, and what influences their ability to remain on treatment?” said Dr Okyere.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 62 people living with HIV across three healthcare facilities, using the internationally recognised Health Belief Model to understand how beliefs, personal experiences and social circumstances influence treatment adherence.

The research explored the complex interaction between the health system, individual experiences and Fiji’s socio-cultural environment.

It highlighted issues such as fear of being recognised at specialist clinics, financial pressures, family rejection, religious beliefs, transport costs and the potential value of peer-led Talanoa support.

“Our central finding is that medication adherence is not simply an individual responsibility. It is shaped by three interacting environments: the health system, the patient’s psychosocial circumstances and the wider socio-cultural context,” revealed Dr Okyere.

Among the findings that concerned the researchers most was the persistence of stigma and misinformation surrounding HIV.

“The most concerning finding is the convergence of stigma, fatalism and service barriers. Some participants viewed HIV as a death sentence or divine punishment. Others feared family or religious rejection, avoided visible HIV clinics, or considered replacing antiretroviral therapy with herbal remedies or faith healing,” Dr Okyere added.

The research recommends decentralising Anti Retroviral Therapy (ART) services, expanding mental health support, strengthening patient-provider communication and establishing culturally safe, peer-led Talanoa groups to improve long-term treatment outcomes.

Dr Okyere believes universities have a vital role to play in strengthening Fiji’s response to the HIV epidemic.

“FNU can contribute through education, research, community engagement and policy support. The University can also serve as a neutral convening institution, bringing together people living with HIV, healthcare providers, faith-based organisations, community leaders and policymakers to co-design acceptable responses,” she explained.

She said FNU can further strengthen HIV education across its health programmes while supporting research, public awareness campaigns and partnerships that promote compassionate, stigma-free healthcare.

“HIV is a health condition, not a moral failure, a source of shame or divine punishment. People living with HIV deserve the same dignity, compassion and support as anyone living with another health condition.”

“Improving HIV treatment adherence is a collective responsibility, and every family, faith community, institution and individual has a role,” she emphasised.

FNU Research Exposes Dangerous HIV Misconceptions Among Fiji's Youth



Shayal Sonika.
Photo: Christal Kapoor

By Christal Kapoor

Despite growing public awareness campaigns, many young adults in Fiji still believe HIV can be transmitted through kissing, fear they would rather die than receive a positive diagnosis, and are too afraid to discuss sexual health with their own parents.

These were among the sobering findings presented by Fiji National University (FNU) researcher Shayal Sonika, during the Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS) 2026, where she unveiled her study on *“Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Regarding Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), Including HIV, Among Young Adults in Suva, Fiji.”*

The study explored the experiences and perceptions of 32 young adults aged between 18 and 24 years living in Suva, providing valuable insight into the knowledge gaps, attitudes and behaviours influencing sexual health among Fiji’s youth.

“We often assume young people know where to get tested, where to access condoms or where to seek help.”

“But our findings show that many simply don’t know, and we cannot continue making those assumptions,” she said.

The study found that while many participants understood that condoms help prevent sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies, consistent condom use remained low.

Many admitted they were less likely to use condoms with regular partners because they trusted them, while others cited unplanned sexual encounters, alcohol or drug use, and a preference for “skin-to-skin” intimacy as reasons for not using protection consistently.

However, it was the misconceptions surrounding HIV that proved most alarming.

“A lot of participants still believed HIV could be spread through kissing and petting.”

“Many also said they would feel ashamed, hopeless or that they would rather die if they were diagnosed with HIV.” Shayal revealed.

The research also highlighted the silence surrounding sexual health within many households.

When asked whether they would discuss sexual health or sexually transmitted

infections with their parents, many participants admitted they were too afraid to have the conversation.

“They feared their parents would become angry, punish them or even disown them.”

“That fear prevents many young people from seeking accurate information and support,” Shayal explained.

Stigma also emerged as one of the strongest barriers to accessing healthcare.

Participants described people living with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections as being judged, mocked, labelled and socially excluded by their communities, creating fear around testing and treatment.

Many participants reported avoiding clinics because they worried about judgement from healthcare workers, being seen by staff of the opposite gender or having their confidentiality compromised.

“The nurses or the doctors judge us and talk about us. Some staff are so rude and don’t even smile at the patient. That’s why we don’t come. These were some things that participants mentioned,” she added.

Others cited long waiting times, limited clinic operating hours, transport costs and the lack of HIV and STI testing services in remote communities as additional barriers to accessing care.

After graduating from FNU in 2019, she began working in primary healthcare before joining the HIV Hub, where caring for patients transformed her perspective.

“When I joined the Hub, I started seeing the harsh reality of HIV patients. That’s when my passion grew stronger.”

“Listening to their stories, seeing the long-term impact of stigma and the challenges they face every day made me realise how important this work is,” Shayal further stated.

As a young Indo-Fijian researcher working in sexual and reproductive health, she acknowledges that discussing topics such as sex and HIV can still be considered taboo in many communities.

“But the more we talk about it, that’s how we are going to decrease the stigma.”

“No one wants to talk about sexually transmitted infections because they are seen as such sensitive issues. But it’s high time we started these conversations. The outbreak is just getting worse.”

“We need to create as much awareness as we can. Young people need accurate information, safe spaces to ask questions and healthcare services they can trust,” she reiterated.

Based on the findings, Shayal is calling for youth-friendly health services, better training for healthcare workers, stronger comprehensive sexual health education in schools and greater collaboration between communities, churches and health authorities to reduce stigma and improve awareness.

Health & Hustle

Fiji's Public Health Graduates Could Help Strengthen Health System Resilience

By Wati Talebula

Fiji may already have part of the workforce it needs to strengthen disease prevention, health promotion and emergency response, but clearer pathways are needed to ensure public health graduates can contribute more effectively.

Undergraduate public health graduates are trained in areas including disease prevention, health promotion, surveillance, health information, community engagement and emergency response.

New research suggests many are ready to apply these skills more fully, but their capabilities are not always consistently recognised or utilised.

This was highlighted by Fijian PhD candidate Avendra Kumar Prakash of Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington, who presented preliminary findings from his doctoral research on Day 1 of the 2026 Pacific Islands Health Research Symposium (PIHRS) this month. His research examines how Fiji's undergraduate public health graduates are employed, recognised and utilised, and how they could contribute to strengthening health-system resilience and emergency response.

"Fiji needs excellent doctors, nurses and other clinical professionals, but a resilient health system also needs a recognised workforce working before illness reaches the hospital."

"Our clinical professionals are caring for patients while also carrying important responsibilities in prevention, surveillance, health promotion and outbreak response. Appropriately integrating public health graduates could provide additional capacity for these population-level functions, allowing clinical professionals to give greater attention to the specialised clinical care they are trained to provide," said Mr Prakash.

Mr Prakash stressed that public health graduates should not be viewed as a replacement for established health professions.

"They are a complementary part of the health workforce," he added.

"Public health graduates are trained to support prevention, surveillance, health promotion, data analysis, community engagement and emergency response. The question is how Fiji can use this existing capability more strategically alongside its clinical workforce," Mr Prakash further added.

The research currently draws on a national survey and 25 talanoa involving 15 graduates, four academic participants and six stakeholders.

Preliminary findings indicate that graduates are already contributing across government, non-government, private and community settings. However, their public health capabilities are not always consistently recognised or used



Mr Avendra Kumar Prakash.
Photo: Luke Salababa

in their current roles.

Among survey respondents who answered the relevant questions, 54.2 per cent reported contributing to an outbreak response. Graduates also described supporting Fiji's COVID-19 response through activities including surveillance, data management, vaccination registration, coordination and community communication.

However, only 40.5 per cent reported using the skills from their public health degree often or always in their current work.

Approximately 9 in 10 respondents identified a shortage of dedicated public health positions, while around four in five reported that public health roles and career pathways were unclear.

Mr Prakash said the findings should be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen Fiji's health system rather than as criticism of any institution or profession.

"Better recognition, clearer entry pathways and purposeful deployment could enable these graduates to work alongside clinical teams, communities, government agencies and civil-society organisations."

"A stronger division of responsibilities could help Fiji respond to immediate illness while also investing in prevention," explained Mr Prakash.

He said this was particularly important as Fiji faced increasingly complex and overlapping health challenges.

"A health system becomes more resilient when it can anticipate risks, work closely with communities, respond rapidly during emergencies and continue delivering essential services under pressure," he added.

The study is guided by the Fijian Vanua Research Framework and uses talanoa to understand graduates' experiences within Fiji's cultural and institutional context.

Concepts including 'veiwekani' or relationships, 'raica lesu or critical reflection, and 'veitokoni' or mutual support, help ensure the research remains connected to people, place and collective responsibility.

The emerging findings could support future discussions around graduate placement opportunities, clearer position descriptions, public health workforce mapping, and stronger links between universities, employers and government agencies.

"Fiji's triple burden cannot be addressed by hospitals and clinical care alone."

"Clinical care remains essential, but Fiji must also strengthen the workforce responsible for preventing illness, understanding health risks, engaging communities and responding before problems become crises."

"Fiji may not need to begin from zero. Part of the workforce needed to strengthen prevention and resilience may already have been trained. The next step is to recognise this capability, create appropriate pathways and use it well," Mr Prakash highlighted.

The research is ongoing, and the findings presented at PIHRS are preliminary. Final conclusions and recommendations will be developed following completion of the analysis and further engagement with participants and relevant stakeholders.



TRAINING PROGRAMME

DON'T MISS OUT!

FNU GYM Nasinu Campus
5pm – 6pm

EVERY TUESDAYS DANCE AEROBICS EXERCISE.

EVERY THURSDAYS CIRCUIT TRAINING EXERCISE.

- \$10 Community Members
- \$5 FNU Staff and Students
- \$3 Per head If Groups of 10+ (Staff / Students Only)

PROPER GYM ATTIRE REQUIRED

Payment at the Counter

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