

## “Childhood obesity, a growing concern”



*Participants of the inaugural Pacific ECHO Forum at Novotel Hotel in Nadi.*

Childhood obesity is a growing problem in the Pacific Islands – it affects the health and wellbeing of children, increases their risk of diabetes and heart disease in later life. These were the comments of Dr William May, Dean of College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) at Fiji National University (FNU).

Speaking at Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (Pacific ECHO) Network's inaugural forum at the Novotel Hotel in Nadi, Dr May, said the organisation (Pacific ECHO Network) was established by Ministries of Health and their partners in the Pacific, in line with the healthy island vision of a Pacific where 'Children are nurtured in body and mind'.

“The ambition of the Network is to stimulate and support collective action in four prioritised areas: physical activity promotion, reducing children’s exposure to the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages, the promotion and evaluation of fiscal policies such as taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and child obesity surveillance,” Dr May said.

Around 45 participants, including representatives from 17 Pacific Island Countries and territories, technical agencies, and academics from regional Universities, development partners and civil society representatives attended the two-day Forum.

Fiji’s Ministry of Health and Medical Services-National Advisor NCDs and Director Wellness Fiji, Dr Isimeli Tukana said obesity was a recognised problem in the country.

Dr Tukana said childhood in Fiji was from pregnancy up to 18 years of old.

“We at the ministry provide three different services including; Antenatal Clinics, Maternity Child Health Clinic and School (Primary and Secondary) Clinics,” he said.

“For us to tackle NCDs, we have to strengthen our services where we have identified the need to further upskill our staff in terms of capacity building.”

“These are the staff who run our clinics on the ground and we will train them further to zoom into communities where childhood obesity is prevalent.”

Dr Tukana said this was an era of evidence based medicine and acknowledged the support of CMNHS’s Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases (C-POND Unit).

An interesting view was also shared by the Permanent Secretary Health and Medical Services of Kiribati, Kaaro Neeti.

Neeti said the culture in Kiribati was such where a big baby or child was seen as a sign of healthy and happy baby.

“This is the first time I am part of such forum and I realise that we need to start looking into actions to work towards ending childhood obesity.”  
“We need to do more advocacies in Kiribati to change the cultural mindsets of our people. It will be a challenge but we need to start now,” Neeti said.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) are providing technical support to the network, along with other academic and development partners.

The College’s Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases (C-POND) is the Secretariat for the Network.

Head of School, Public Health and Primary Care (SPHPC) at the College, Dr Donald Wilson said: “as per the updates discussed in the forum, we are still seeing increasing numbers of obese children in the Pacific Island Countries”.

“This is a reflection that more concerted interdisciplinary effort is needed to ensure we have the support of all sectors of the society,” Dr Wilson said.

Another FNU academic, Dr Pragya Singh stated that the forum acted as a means of collaboration between representatives of ministries of health from respective Pacific Island nations to map out ways in which they could combat childhood obesity.

“There is a lack of research in the area of childhood obesity but it is an area of national and regional concern,” she said.

Acting Head of Department Primary Care and Nutrition, at CMNHS, FNU, Dr Gade Waqa, said: “we as an education institution are embedding NCDs in our curriculum to address issues such as childhood obesity which is an area of concern”.

Currently, eight students are enrolled in the SPHPC’s Masters in Public Health in Non Communicable Diseases.



*Key participants at the Pacific ECHO Forum.*