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College of Medicine,
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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.

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COVER PHOTO
NAINA CAGI DOING AEVI
FIELD RESEARCH



Welcome Note

Dear Readers,

What a year 2025 has been for us, we've had some highs and some lows but in the words of Noel Coward - "The Show Must Go On"!

Key highlights for this month include;

- the opportunity for FIPHR to come together for the 2025 Strategic Planning meeting
- staff being conferred PhDs
- study and networking opportunities
- partnership opportunities

read about all this and more in this issue of INSIGHTS.

As always, do remember to follow our Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research page on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61573882786738> and LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/fiji-institute-of-pacific-health-research-fiphr-a034073a3/> for news, events and research updates or let us know what you think we should highlight in our next issue.

Vinaka Vakalevu.

Dr Donald Wilson

**Associate Dean Research CMNHS
Director Fiji Institute of Pacific
Health Research (FIPHR)**

FIPHR sets plan for Strategic Direction

Empowering Pacific Voices: FIPHR's Vision for a Healthier Future

At the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR), we believe the most effective solutions for the Pacific are those born from within the Pacific. Our mission is centered on the belief that local expertise is our greatest asset. By uplifting regional researchers and developing "fit-for-purpose" health resources, we ensure that our work is not just culturally informed, but sustainably integrated into our communities. Our roadmap to bring this vision to life, is the foundation of our 2026 - 2030 Strategic Plan.

This strategy is meticulously aligned with the Fiji National University (FNU) Strategic Plan, the CMNHS Annual Plan, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By anchoring our goals to National Development Plans, we ensure our research translates into policy that actually moves the needle. Targeting Real-World Challenges, we aren't just looking at data; we're looking at lives. Our focus remains fixed on the most pressing health hurdles facing our people, including:

- Non-Communicable Diseases: Tackling the obesity epidemic head-on.
- Health Security: Strengthening defenses against infectious diseases.
- Systemic Reform: Advocating for better funding and transparent governance within our health systems.

Through a powerful synergy of national and international partnerships, FIPHR is committed to bringing world-class research excellence to our shores—driven by the Pacific, for the Pacific.





ETHICS - A PRIORITY FOR RESEARCH

The Mapping and Situational Analysis of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) Across the 21 Pacific Island Countries and Territories project is a World Health Organisation (WHO) regional initiative aimed at strengthening research ethics governance across the Pacific. While Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have long participated in health research, the capacity to provide effective ethical oversight varies significantly across the region.

Many PICTs face challenges such as limited institutional capacity, under-resourced REC secretariats, shortages of trained committee members, and the absence of clear national policies and standard operating procedures. These gaps contribute to regional inequities in research governance and increase vulnerability to externally driven research agendas. Strengthening REC systems is essential to protect research participants, uphold international ethical standards, and ensure research delivers meaningful benefits to local communities.

The study combines a comprehensive desktop review of research ethics governance across all 21 PICTs and in-depth qualitative interviews in three representative countries, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, and Tuvalu, reflecting different levels of REC maturity and the three Pacific subregions (Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia). This approach ensures both breadth and depth, capturing governance, technical, and operational realities across diverse national contexts.

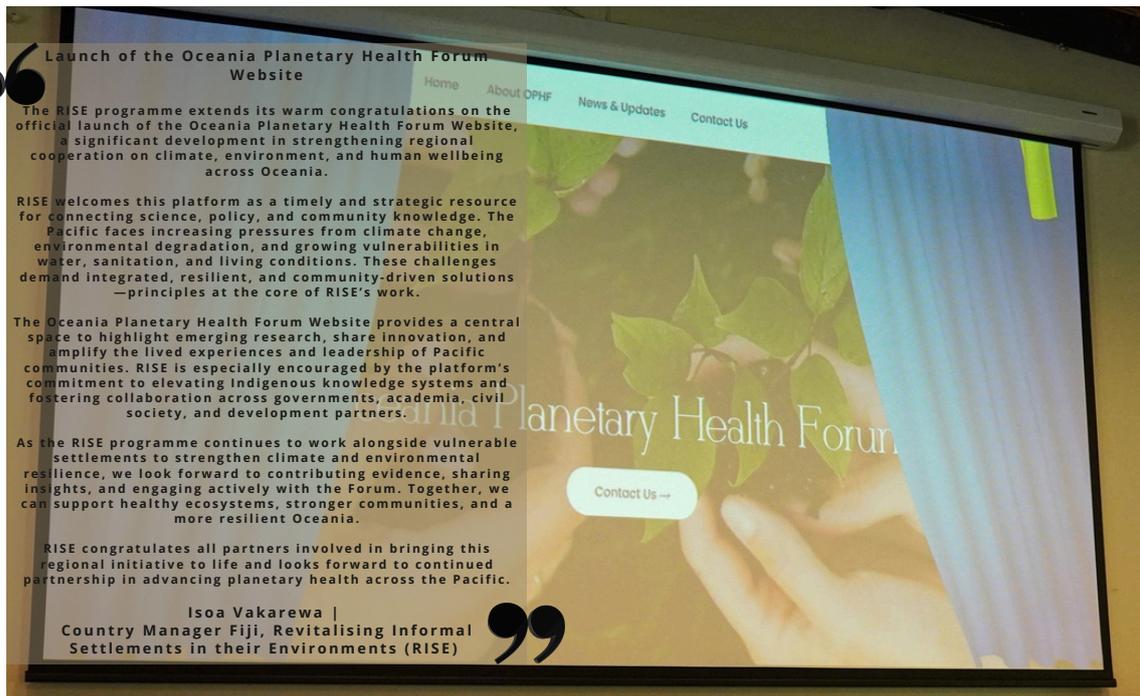
The research team, Ms Etivina Lovo and Mr Inoke Sivaro, undertook in-country qualitative data collection in Kiribati and Tuvalu (late November and early December 2025). In Kiribati, focus group discussions were conducted in Tarawa with key national stakeholders to map existing research governance arrangements and examine pathways for strengthening the Research Ethics Committee (REC) under the Kiribati National Research Coordinating Committee (NRCC), housed within the Office of the President. Discussions centred on REC mandates, governance systems, committee membership, operational challenges, and country-specific capacity needs.

In Tuvalu, where a formal Research Ethics Committee is not yet established, a research ethics mapping exercise was undertaken in collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister through the Development Coordinating Committee (DCC). This engagement focused on clarifying the mandate, governance structure, and foundational requirements necessary to support the establishment of a national Research Ethics Committee for Tuvalu.

Findings from this study will generate critical evidence on REC governance, institutional capacity, and gaps across the Pacific. The results will inform WHO's future national and regional capacity-strengthening initiatives, including tailored technical support, training programmes, and the development of regional frameworks and guidelines to support robust and equitable research ethics governance across the Pacific.



FIJI POSITIONED AS GLOBAL PLANETARY HEALTH HUB WITH LAUNCH OF OCEANIA PLANETARY HEALTH FORUM WEBSITE



The Oceania Planetary Health Forum (OPHF) website www.oceaniaphf.com was officially launched by Dr Berlin Kafoa – Director Public Health Division SPC on 3 December, 2025. The digital platform marks a critical and unifying step in addressing the complex environmental and human health challenges facing the Pacific.

This launch reinforces Fiji’s growing global leadership, as Fiji is now the **designated Global Planetary Health Hub for Oceania**. This pivotal recognition follows the establishment of the Pacific Planetary Health Research Centre (PPHRC) in February this year, a key outcome of the inaugural Oceania Planetary Health Forum held at the Shangri-La.

PPHRC: The Global Hub for Oceania

The PPHRC, under which important WISH and RISE projects operate, was recently designated by the Planetary Health Alliance (PHA) Global as the official Planetary Health Hub for Oceania. This designation places Fiji at the epicenter of regional efforts to foster resilient futures.

The research under the PPHRC utilizes a comprehensive Planetary Health approach, looking beyond human and animal health to include environmental, ecological perspectives, bio-diversity, and good governance for health.

A Digital Canoe for Unified Action

The new OPHF website will serve as the central hub for researchers, policymakers, and community leaders committed to holistic sustainability across the region. Planetary Health - the understanding that human health and well-being are intrinsically linked to the health of the planet - is especially pertinent to the Pacific, which is disproportionately vulnerable to climate change, ocean degradation, and biodiversity loss.

The platform provides a vital mechanism to share place-based knowledge and accelerate effective, regionally appropriate solutions that recognize this profound ecological interdependence, which directly impacts food security, water quality, and public health outcomes.

The site is specifically designed to:

- Amplify the voices and traditional knowledge of Indigenous and local communities, ensuring initiatives are grounded in cultural relevance.
- Feature news, events, and updates on Planetary Health initiatives.
- Progress action items outlined in the **2025 OPHF Call To Action**, facilitating transparent dialogue and coordinated action against pervasive threats from rising sea levels to non-communicable diseases.

On the Front Lines of Crisis

Prof Aaron Jenkins, Chair of the OPHF Committee, emphasized the urgency of this unified approach.

“Our islands are on the front lines of the global ecological crisis. The OPHF website is more than just a resource; it is a shared canoe for our region to paddle in unison. It enables us to move from isolated efforts to a powerful, unified movement that places the health of our people, our land, and our ocean at the very center of our policy.”

The Oceania Planetary Health Forum (OPHF) is a multi-disciplinary consortium dedicated to translating Planetary Health principles into actionable outcomes, bringing together experts from health, environmental science, education, and governance to promote equitable sustainability.

Data Collection Concludes for AEVI Fiji Cohort Project



Rain or shine, the AEVI Project Field Team was on the move! We've officially wrapped up our first round of data collection for the Arbovirus and Emerging Virus Infection Fiji Cohort, and what a journey it has been.

From navigating heavy downpours to working long hours under the Central Division sun, our team's commitment never wavered. More importantly, neither did the spirit of the people we serve.

This milestone is more than just data; it's about growth and partnership. Our team has gained invaluable skills in sero-surveillance, but the real highlight was the connection we felt in every village and neighborhood. We want to say a heartfelt thank you to every community that welcomed us with open hearts. Your trust allows us to better understand emerging viruses and help guide the future of healthcare in Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu also to our partners and supporters — AFD, Institut Louis Malardé (ILM), FIPHR, CMNHS, FNU, and the Fiji CDC and Ministry of Health and Medical Services — for your continued guidance, collaboration, and trust.

Science in the Cradle: Fiji's New Atomic Approach to Breastfeeding

A LANDMARK PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

In a significant leap forward for maternal and child health in the Pacific, the Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases (C-POND) at Fiji National University (FNU) has officially launched a pioneering five-year initiative. Supported by a 50,000 EUR grant from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), this project represents a high-tech collaboration between FNU, the University of Otago, and the Fiji Ministry of Health.

While "atomic energy" might conjure images of power plants, this project uses nuclear science for a much gentler purpose: ensuring our youngest citizens get the best start in life. By using stable isotope techniques, researchers are moving beyond self-reported surveys to get hard, objective data on how Fiji's infants are being fed.

The Breastfeeding Paradox

It is no secret that breastfeeding is a biological powerhouse. It reduces child mortality, builds robust immune systems, and promotes optimal neurodevelopment.

In Fiji, the good news is that breastfeeding initiation rates are quite high, mothers want to breastfeed! However, the "paradox" lies in the drop-off: exclusive breastfeeding rates (meaning nothing but breast milk for the first six months) remain well below international targets.

To fix a problem, we first have to understand it. The study aims to dive deep into the "why" behind these numbers. Are mothers returning to work too early? Is there a lack of community support? Or is it the pervasive belief that "my milk isn't enough"? This project will provide the clarity needed to turn these questions into evidence-based policy.

The "Dose-to-Mother" (DTM) Method: How it Works

At the heart of this research is the Dose-to-Mother (DTM) stable isotope technique. This is a non-invasive, safe, and highly accurate method used to measure exactly how much breast milk an infant is consuming.

Project Detail	Information
Target Participants	200 Lactating Mothers and their babies
Infant Age Range	3 to 12 months
Location	Suva, Fiji
Start Date	February 2026
Seasonal Focus	100 mothers in Wet Season 100 in Dry Season

Here is the breakdown of the 14-day process:

1. The Dose: A lactating mother is given a small, precise dose of deuterium-labelled water. Deuterium is a stable (non-radioactive) isotope of hydrogen that occurs naturally in the environment.
2. The Transfer: As the mother breastfeeds, the deuterium passes into her milk and then to the baby.
3. The Measurement: By collecting small samples of saliva from both the mother and the infant over two weeks, researchers can calculate exactly how much milk the baby has consumed and whether they are receiving water or other foods from outside sources.

"This isn't just about numbers; it's about accuracy. Unlike surveys where mothers might forget a single bottle of formula, the DTM method provides an objective biological record of the infant's intake."

This method has already been successfully implemented in over 20 low- and middle-income countries, where it has been used to refine national nutrition guidelines and improve maternal support strategies.

Why This Matters for Fiji and the Pacific?

This project isn't just a win for science; it's a win for the community. The data generated will be the first of its kind in the Pacific region. By understanding human milk intake patterns, the Ministry of Health can better tailor its programs to reduce the long-term burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). We know that early nutrition sets the stage for health later in life thus preventing obesity and diabetes starting in the cradle.





THE WISDOM OF THE TALANOA

DECOLONISING RESEARCH ETHICS FOR THE PACIFIC

For many, the PhD journey is seen as a solitary climb toward academic recognition. But for those working to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern research, it is a journey of community, cultural precision, and profound responsibility.

We sat down with **Dr Etivina Lovo**, a recent PhD graduate whose work is re-valuing **Pacific Islands' indigenous principles** and weaving them into the fabric of global research ethics. Here is the story of her journey and the lessons learned along the way.

The 30-Second Pitch: Why Indigenous Ethics Matter

If you were to step into an elevator and describe this research, the message is clear: Pacific Islands' indigenous principles must be re-valued and actively engaged in research ethics. This isn't just about inclusion; it's about ensuring that the way we conduct research respects the cultural sovereignty of the people being studied.

The Rituals of Success: Time and Talanoa

How do you finish a PhD while working full-time? It comes down to two things: Commitment and Community.

- The Routine: Dedicating a few hours every single day, without exception, to the writing process.
- The Tools: Relying on Cloud-stored transcripts from talanoa sessions (traditional communal dialogues).

"I am most grateful to the participants who shared their knowledge. Without them, developing these indigenous research ethics frameworks would have been impossible."

Advice for the Struggling Student

If you are currently hitting a wall with your thesis, the advice is simple but direct: Identify the root of the struggle.

1. Define it clearly: Is it the topic, the methodology, or the timing?
2. Act on it: Once defined, create a plan.
3. Be honest: If you cannot define or act on the struggle, it may be a sign that this isn't your true path. Finding your true pathway will just be as rewarding as doing a PhD. Finding your real pathway

Looking Forward: Changing the World Now

Why wait ten years to make an impact? The beauty of a PhD is that the dissemination of knowledge starts on day one.

The goal is to be brave. Talk to peers, present at international forums, and engage with government ministries. Whether it's through volunteering to develop guidelines or reviewing papers, the impact of your work begins the moment you decide to share your voice.

“

Your body of knowledge is unique. A PhD is more than just a title; it is a platform that allows you to articulate your thoughts clearly, engage with the wealth of knowledge provided by others, and step into your role as an expert.

Do not hesitate to contribute your new knowledge to the world

Dr Etivina Lovo

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Monash GIG Students Explore Planetary Health with RISE and WISH Pacific



In a powerful exchange of knowledge and community engagement, the Watershed Interventions for Systems Health (WISH) and Revitalising Informal Settlements in their Environments (RISE) teams recently hosted nearly 300 students from Monash University. As part of the Global Immersion Guarantee (GIG) program, students arrived in three cohorts - two in December 2025 and a final block on January 13, 2026. The visits offered a "living classroom" experience, moving beyond textbooks to show how human health and environmental integrity are two sides of the same coin.

At the heart of the visit was the concept of Planetary Health. This emerging discipline recognizes that we cannot have healthy people on a sick planet. By focusing on water and sanitation, the GIG students explored how managing our natural resources directly impacts the prevention of disease and the flourishing of local communities.



Project Spotlight: RISE

The RISE program is a transdisciplinary research initiative trialing a water-sensitive approach to sanitation in informal settlements across Makassar, Indonesia, and Suva, Fiji.

- The Goal: Moving away from traditional "big pipe" infrastructure toward nature-based solutions.
- The Method: Co-designing green infrastructure, such as constructed wetlands, to treat wastewater naturally.
- Success Metrics: Improved health and well-being, particularly for children under five—and increased ecological diversity in the surrounding environment.



Project Spotlight: WISH - Pacific

WISH focuses on the "Ridge to Reef" connection. The health of a watershed (the land that drains into a common waterway) dictates the health of everyone downstream. "Higher incidences of water-related bacterial diseases like typhoid and leptospirosis occur within watersheds with cleared land and high livestock density."

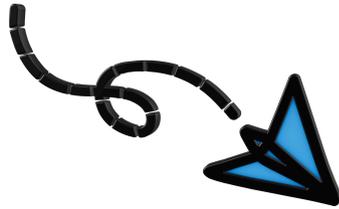
By implementing targeted watershed interventions, WISH works to:

- **Reduce Disease Risk:** Minimizing flooding and standing water to curb dengue and bacterial outbreaks.
- **Protect Ecosystems:** Preventing sediment and nutrients from damaging coral reefs and freshwater sources.
- **Support Livelihoods:** Ensuring the cultural and food practices of local people remain sustainable.

After their briefings, students stepped out of the classroom and into the communities. They visited the RISE settlements of Muanivatu, Komave, Matata, and Waila, witnessing firsthand how green infrastructure is being integrated into the fabric of daily life.

These visits allowed students to see the reality of "systems health" where a clean waterway isn't just an environmental win, but a foundation for a healthier, more resilient future for the communities.





INSIGHTS ENGAGEMENT HEALTH AND WELLNESS WORD SEARCH

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Thank you for your time - we would love to hear from you.

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