

# INSIGHTS



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

# Welcome Note



Dear Readers,

As we approach the first quarter of 2026, the year is passing by fast but our commitment to health research remains. We're finalizing workplans for the year, attending conferences, celebrating career wins and generally progressing our work in health research.

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  
Director  
Health Research

# A "FRESH" Start for Fiji's Reproductive Health: Scaling Up the Fight Against STIs



This past February, a group of health experts, community leaders, and researchers gathered with a singular, ambitious goal: to change the trajectory of reproductive health in Fiji.

The FRESH Technical Advisory Group (TAG) met on 6 February 2026 to chart the next steps for the Fiji Reproductive Strategies for Healthier Communities (FRESH) Study. While "Technical Advisory Group" might sound like a lot of paperwork and jargon, the reality is far more urgent. We are talking about a community-wide effort to tackle a silent health crisis that affects the core of Fijian families: mothers and their babies.

For a long time, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) like Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea have been a "hush-hush" topic. But the data doesn't lie, and it certainly isn't quiet.

Associate Professor Lucia Romani (Kirby Institute, UNSW) brought some sobering numbers to the table from the 2019 FAST Study. Among pregnant women aged 18–29 in the Central Division - 1 in 3 tested positive for Chlamydia and 1 in 10 tested positive for Gonorrhoea.

If rates are this high among expectant mothers, it's a clear signal that these infections are widespread among both men and women in the broader community. Most of these cases are asymptomatic (meaning people feel perfectly fine while the infection does its damage), leading to complications like stillbirths or long-term health issues for newborns.

The FRESH Study isn't just about collecting data; it's about action. The strategy is straightforward: a single 1-gram dose of azithromycin provided to adults aged 18–49 in the Western Division. By treating the community as a whole, the study will address the prevalence of chlamydia and gonorrhoea and hopefully through the intervention of 1 single dose of AZM reduce complications for mom and baby during delivery and pregnancy.

Planning a community-wide health intervention is like conducting a massive orchestra. Here's a look at the "instruments" being tuned:

- **The Pilot Success:** The FRESH pilot has already enrolled 925 people. Interestingly, 89% of those tested were asymptomatic. This confirms the "silent" nature of the problem - you can't wait for symptoms to appear to take action.
- **Boots on the Ground:** This isn't a "top-down" project. The team has completed consultations at every level - national, provincial, and grassroots.
- **Microplanning:** The team is currently finishing phases of logistical planning with nursing managers and district nurses to ensure the medicine reaches the people who need it, regardless of how remote their village might be.
- **Clear Talk, No Confusion:** Learning from past health campaigns, the TAG emphasized that messaging must be crystal clear. Ro Alipate Doviverata Mataitini, a Communications Consultant, is leading the charge to ensure the information is not just accurate, but culturally sensitive and reassuring.

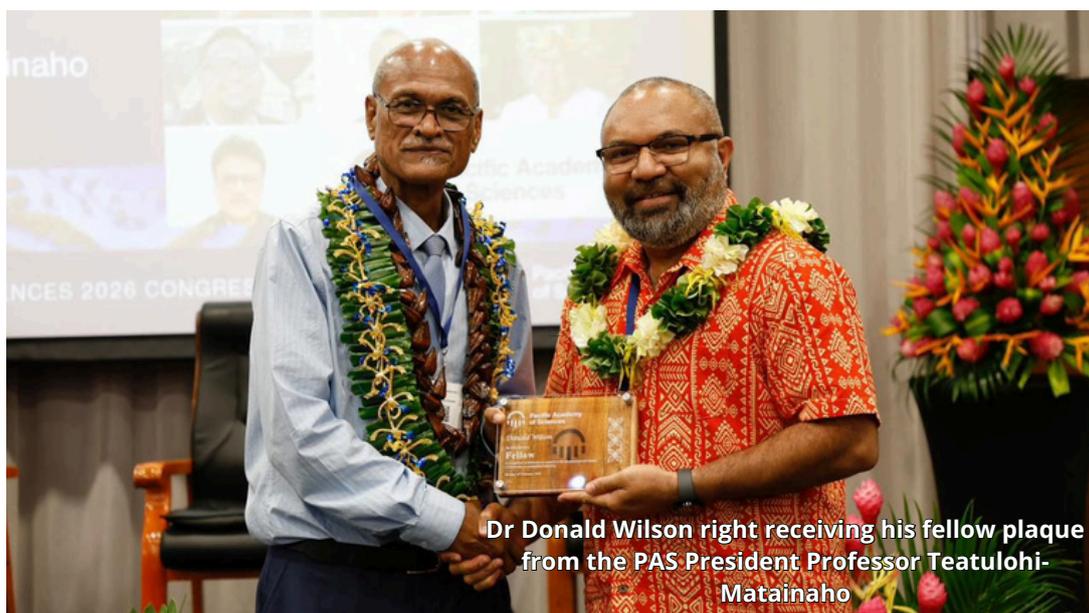
"The purpose of microplanning is to discuss logistics, challenges, and lessons learned ... to ensure communities receive clear and reassuring information." - TAG Discussion Note

The momentum is building. As we move further into 2026, the focus shifts to Phase 3 Microplanning. This involves working directly with the Provincial Council offices, engaging Turaga ni koro (village headmen) and Mata ni tikina (district representatives) in the Western Division.

By keeping the community at the heart of the research, the FRESH Study is moving toward a future where "1 in 3" becomes a statistic of the past. As TAG Co-chair Dr. Kesaia Nawaqaliva noted, collaboration is the key. When health leaders and communities walk together, the results are always healthier families.



# FNU ACADEMIC INDUCTED AS FELLOW OF THE PACIFIC ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



Dr Donald Wilson right receiving his fellow plaque from the PAS President Professor Teatulohi-Matainaho

The Fiji National University (FNU) proudly celebrates the induction of Associate Professor Donald Wilson as a Fellow of the Pacific Academy of Sciences. A milestone that signals the growing influence of Pacific-led research in shaping global scientific dialogue.

As the first Fellow from FNU, Associate Professor Wilson described the honour as both humbling and deeply significant for the region.

“Being inducted as a Fellow of the Pacific Academy of Sciences represents recognition of a broader movement and the strengthening of Pacific-led scientific leadership,” he said.

“Professionally, it signals that research emerging from Fiji and the wider Pacific can shape global conversations on health, climate, and development. I see this not as an endpoint, but as an opportunity to elevate FNU and the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR) as regional hubs for integrated, systems-based research.”

The Fellowship acknowledges Associate Professor Wilson’s sustained contributions to strengthening research ecosystems across Fiji and the Pacific. His work integrates infectious disease surveillance, planetary health, sexual and reproductive health, maternal and child health, and non-communicable disease research within a comprehensive systems framework.



**Dr Donald Wilson (centre) with Mrs Wilson and their niece**

Through regional collaborations, laboratory strengthening, health workforce development, and integrated surveillance platforms, his research has consistently focused on ensuring Pacific science remains policy-relevant, equity-driven, and responsive to the region's health, climate, and environmental challenges.

He credits FNU as central to his professional journey and the advancement of medical science in the region.

"FNU has been pivotal. Through leadership roles within the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) and the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research, we have worked to embed research within education, clinical services, and community engagement," Associate Professor Wilson said.

"FNU's support has enabled us to move beyond project-based research towards institutional research capacity — building laboratories, strengthening research training, mentoring young scientists, and fostering partnerships aligned with Fiji's National Development Plan 2050, the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy, and Sustainable Development Goal 3." Associate Professor Wilson emphasised that Pacific island nations face some of the most pressing global challenges, including climate change, infectious disease threats, and escalating non-communicable diseases. He believes Pacific-led research is critical to shaping effective and sustainable policy responses.

"When evidence is generated locally, it strengthens ownership, improves policy uptake, and builds trust between communities, governments, and researchers," he said.

"A planetary health lens, recognising the interconnection between environmental systems and human health, will be essential in shaping the next generation of Pacific health policy."

In a message to emerging researchers and healthcare professionals, he encouraged young Pacific scholars to pursue excellence without compromising their regional identity.

"Do not view international excellence and Pacific identity as separate ambitions; they are complementary. Our region holds some of the most urgent research questions in global and planetary health," he said.

"Pacific science is no longer peripheral to global conversations; it is essential to them. Our region is not just vulnerable; it is innovative, resilient, and capable of generating solutions the world can learn from."

The Fellowship reflects the FNU's ongoing commitment to strengthening research leadership, building institutional capacity, and positioning Fiji and the Pacific as active contributors to global scientific advancement.

Source: [www.fnu.ac.fj/blog/news](http://www.fnu.ac.fj/blog/news)

# Nipah Virus

## ALERTNESS OVER ALARM: ASSESSING THE NIPAH VIRUS RISK IN FIJI

BY ISIRELI KOROITUKU

"Over the past few weeks there has been growing discussion about the Nipah virus and whether it poses a threat to Fiji and the Pacific. From my perspective, the risk for Fiji remains very low at this stage.

Most known outbreaks have occurred in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore, and there have been no confirmed cases in Fiji or elsewhere in the Pacific.

Even so, it is something we should approach carefully and sensibly. A One Health approach would be the most appropriate path for Fiji. This means keeping an eye on both the bat population and human health trends, particularly among travellers returning from countries where cases have been reported in recent months.

Strengthening our border systems is also important. Health awareness at international airports and seaports, along with strong biosecurity checks, can help reduce risk. Travellers should be encouraged to declare recent travel and possible exposure, especially since the incubation period for Nipah virus can range from about 4 to 14 days and sometimes longer.

Regular updates from the Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS) would also help keep the public informed. Staying alert without causing panic is the right balance for Fiji."

**"At the moment, the region is considered low risk but not zero risk."**

# Strengthening Health Resilience

The WISH Pacific Technical Advisory Group (TAG) convened on February 23, 2026, to chart the course for the next phase of disease surveillance in Fiji. With a focus on climate-sensitive infectious diseases and the "One Health" approach, the meeting highlighted significant milestones for the Enhanced Acute Febrile Illness (AFI) Surveillance Pilot.

## A New Frontier in Disease Surveillance

The AFI Fiji Surveillance Study is moving full steam ahead in the Wainimala Watershed (Naitasiri Province). This DFAT-funded pilot, operating out of Vunidawa Hospital and Nakorosule Health Centre, is more than just a medical study, it's an evolving One Health model. By integrating human, animal, and environmental data, the team aims to build a proactive shield against climate-driven health threats.

## Ethics & Approvals: All Systems Go

We are pleased to announce that all regulatory hurdles have been cleared. With approvals secured from the FNU and MOHMS Human Ethics Committees, as well as local facility acknowledgments from the University of Sydney and DMO Central, the project is officially in the "green light" phase.

## Mark Your Calendars: Specialized training for clinical and laboratory staff is scheduled for mid-to-late April 2026.

## Logistics & The Digital Lab

Modernizing surveillance requires modern tools. To minimize human error and ensure seamless tracking, the project is implementing a barcode and QR-code labeling system for all samples.

- Procurement: Consumables for approximately 400 samples are expected to arrive by mid-March.
- Partnerships: WHO DPS will provide critical support for respiratory and arboviral testing.

- Data Integrity: The team is focusing on ensuring REDCap data integrates smoothly with existing MOHMS systems to prevent administrative duplication.

## Field Report: Selecting the Best Sites

Following a rigorous scoping visit to Naitasiri, the TAG has finalized the pilot locations. The selection was based on a balance of community need and logistical viability:

- Vunidawa Hospital & Nakorosule HC: Selected as the primary hubs. Nakorosule is of particular interest due to recent outbreaks linked to water contamination.
- Laselevu HC: Regrettably excluded due to significant logistical challenges, including river crossings and poor connectivity that risked sample degradation.

## Learning from the Past

While looking forward, the project is also looking back. A Retrospective Review at CWM Hospital (2021–2025) is currently underway.

This master's thesis project will provide a vital baseline, helping the team understand:

1. Causative pathogens in adult AFI presentations.
2. The severity of these cases.
3. The effectiveness of current antibiotic prescribing practices.

## TAG Discussion Highlights

The meeting concluded with a dynamic discussion on optimizing operations. Key points included:

- Metagenomics: High interest in adding retrospective metagenomics to identify elusive pathogens.
- Cold Chain: Ensuring robust refrigeration capacity at all field facilities.
- Transport: Proposals are on the table for project-supported transport to ensure samples from household investigations reach the lab quickly and safely.

# Mapping a Healthier Future: Communities selected for Mid-Rewa Watershed

The WISH-Pacific team has reached a significant milestone in its mission to safeguard public health and environment. Following an intensive "ground-truthing" exercise across the Wainimala, Wainibuka, and Rewa River catchments, 11 communities have been officially selected for the SAPPHIRE programme and the Acute Febrile Illness (AFI) Surveillance Study. This wasn't just a paper-shuffling exercise. The three-day mission involved deep-dive consultations and technical assessments to ensure the program reaches the areas where it can make the most impact.

## **Collaborative Success on the Ground**

The selection process was a masterclass in partnership. Working alongside the Naitasiri Provincial Council Office and Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS) teams from Vunidawa, Nakorosule, and Laselevu, the WISH-Pacific team combined local wisdom with technical data.

The mission, which took place in February 2026, focused on verifying demographic and environmental data to ensure the project's "due diligence" was rock solid. By visiting government stations and health facilities, the team was able to cross-reference reports and record precise GPS coordinates for the identified sites.

## **From 29 to 11: The Selection Criteria**

While 29 communities were initially screened on February 27, 2026, the field verification conducted from February 9–11 (and finalized on February 23) narrowed the list to 11 strategic sites.

**Why these 11?** The team utilized a strict set of technical criteria to justify the selection:

- Population Density: Ensuring enough households for robust socio-economic baseline surveys.
- Disease Prevalence: Preliminary data from Vunidawa Hospital and Nakorosule Health Centre highlighted significant AFI cases in these areas.
- Environmental Risk: Proximity to major river systems was vital to study how effluent runoff contributes to Leptospirosis, Typhoid, Dengue, and Diarrhea (LTDD).
- Water Safety: A common factor among these sites is their reliance on untreated water sources, making them high-priority for health interventions.
- Logistics: Proximity to health facilities ensures the pilot surveillance and community awareness programs can be managed effectively.

## What's Next?

The selection is just the beginning. The WISH-Pacific team is now shifting gears to prepare for the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) process. This ensures that the heart of the project, the community is fully engaged and informed before activities begin.

The upcoming phases include:

1. Presenting the final list to the Research and Steering Committees.
2. Launching formal FPIC consultations with the 11 selected villages.
3. Finalizing the operational roadmap for AFI surveillance.



WISH-Pacific Public Health Surveillance Officer with Laselevu Health Centre Medical Officer



Catchment Coordinator Eferemo (right) with SDHI Vunidawa

# RISE Named Finalist for Prestigious Global Award



In exciting news, the RISE program is a finalist in the World Resources Institute (WRI) Ross Centre Prize for Cities, one of the most respected international honours in the field of urban sustainability. The Prize recognises pioneering projects that are reshaping urban life and offering practical, transferable lessons for cities worldwide.

## Global recognition in a highly competitive field

RISE is one of just five finalists, selected from 334 submissions across 230 cities in 77 countries. Guided by the theme Catalyzing Healthy Cities, the 2025–2026 Prize highlights initiatives that improve access to nature, mobility and essential everyday services.



**We recently sat down with Terrol Graham, a global health practitioner who has just joined us in Fiji. With a career spanning multilateral institutions and U.S. government agencies, Terrol brings a wealth of experience in health systems and policy.**

Below, he shares his journey from Jamaica to Fiji and what he hopes to achieve during his time with the Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR).

**Q: To start, could you tell us a bit about your professional background and what drives your work in global health?**

Terrol: I've spent my career at the intersection of governance, strategy, and delivery. My focus has always been on taking high-level leadership priorities and translating them into operational plans that strengthen health systems. I graduated from Wake Forest University as a Joseph G. Gordon Scholar and later earned my Masters of Public Health from the Yale School of Public Health, and will be finishing my Doctorate in Public Health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. A pivotal moment for me was studying at the University of Copenhagen as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar; it really deepened my fascination with how different countries structure their primary care systems.

**Q: You've worked with major global institutions. How does your personal history influence your professional perspective?**

Terrol: I'm originally from Jamaica, and that lived experience, combined with my policy training gives me a very systems-oriented view of health. I started my career in 2014 with a focus on global health and HIV, TB and malaria epidemiology in Asian countries. I've always been driven to understand the "why" behind trends, which eventually led me to the Fulbright U.S. Student Program.

**Q: Fiji is the 39th country you've visited! What finally drew you to the Pacific?**

It's actually a story that goes back to high school in Jamaica when I was 12. I had a classmate whose parent was Fijian. She spoke about the country with such incredible passion that I knew I had to see it for myself one day. When the opportunity arose to come here, it felt like a full-circle moment. Now that I'm finally here, I haven't been disappointed. The weather and topography are so similar to Jamaica that I felt at home almost immediately.

**Q: What will be your primary focus while working with FIPHR and the Pacific Planetary Health Research Centre (PPHRC)?**

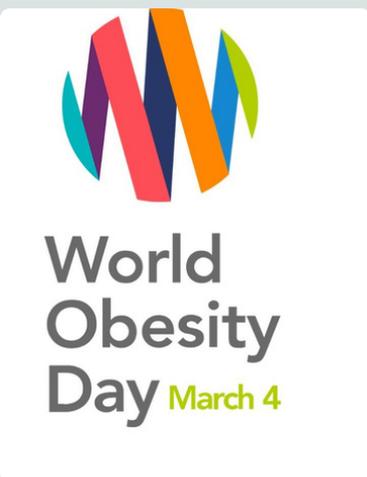
Terrol: My work here at the Fiji National University will focus specifically on HIV research. I'm particularly interested in looking at adolescents and the underlying drivers of drug use and behavioral choices. It's about understanding the "drivers" so we can create more effective, targeted interventions.

**Q: When you aren't focused on health policy, how do you spend your time?**

Terrol: I'm a self-described "nesomaniac", I have a deep-seated wanderlust for islands and travel! I'm always reading something, whether a book or newspaper articles. Outside of that, I'm a massive cinephile and a track and field enthusiast. And, for better or worse, I'm a lifelong Miami Heat fan.

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# IN MARCH



## CONTACT US

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