

The 7th Oticon Foundation Hearing Education Centre Spring Symposium was held on Monday 2nd September 2013 at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland. The subject this year was “**Global Hearing Health: Towards the Development of Hearing Services in the Pacific**”. The idea of the meeting was to consider what was needed to see the establishment of sustainable services for people with hearing loss and ear disease in Pacific Island countries, and how New Zealand audiology and ORL communities could support such in-country service development. Presentations covered what we know about the nature and extent of ear disease and hearing loss in the Pacific region; the services that currently exist or are being planned and what approaches are needed to ensure sustainable service development.

In opening the meeting Peter Thorne, from the University of Auckland, described the almost total lack of services for hearing-impaired people within the Pacific region. Most of those that are available are provided by visiting ENT and audiologists, although there are some small service providers in Fiji and Samoa. In a later talk, Michael Sanders, also from the University of Auckland showed that there is almost no epidemiological data on the extent of hearing impairment in Pacific countries, but his estimates, based on data from the WHO, indicate a very high percentage of the child and adult population have ear disease and hearing loss. According to research by Suzanne Purdy, from the University of Auckland, Pacific children in New Zealand have a high prevalence of auditory processing disorder, which may be a consequence of or exacerbated by persistent middle ear disease. Although it needs to be confirmed by further research, there is probably no reason to believe that children in Pacific countries would not also have a high level of such processing disorders. These reports collectively indicate that the prevalence of hearing loss, ear disease and hearing disability are high in Pacific island nations, and services are needed to provide assess, treat and prevent these conditions in the population. On behalf of Louise Carroll, from the National Foundation for the Deaf, Peter Thorne, presented a description of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons and briefly discussed its implications for Pacific communities. This is a very important document as it requires signatories to respect and support people with disability and governments of countries which adopt the Convention can be held accountable. Obviously Pacific countries that are or become signatories to the Convention will need to recognise hearing disability and the needs of hearing-impaired people, including the provision of services, and this could provide the necessary catalyst for service development.

Donna Lene, the Director of SENESE Inclusive Education in Samoa, provided a keynote address. Donna has led a team that has worked tirelessly over a long time to develop and provide hearing services for young Samoan children. But more recently she has been leading the development and implementation of a national Hearing Service in Samoa which will support children and adults. Donna gave an excellent talk, outlining the services they have already developed, mainly for children with severe or profound loss and talked about where they are heading with the national plan. She talked about the challenges, particularly around the lack of a workforce, funding, facilities and resources and highlighted the need for partnerships within the local communities as well as international agencies and universities. To highlight this she talked about the support from Cochlear in Sydney and the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children to provide cochlear implants and hearing aids for young Samoan children. With backing from AusAID and other international agencies, there is now

a plan to establish an integrated national hearing service, with newborn and childhood hearing screening and intervention services, as well as ENT services and adult hearing services. It is an inspirational story and offers a great example to follow.

Dr Judith McCool, a global health expert from the University of Auckland talked about overall global health approaches to improving the health of Pacific Island communities. Whilst her comments were directed more towards issues of tobacco control and other non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, there was a lot of helpful information to consider for the prevention and treatment of hearing loss and ear disease. In particular, it is important to align with the interests and mandates of major NGOs and funding agencies and the need to partner with these organisations and to obtain government support to ensure that hearing health needs are embedded in government health policy. These points were also reiterated by Teuila Percival from the Pacific Health section of the University of Auckland, who talked about other paediatric services in Pacific islands. She described the significant challenges of health service provision in Pacific countries, with very distributed communities, small populations and lack of resources and pointed out that hearing loss whilst a very important area, has to also compete with serious health issues for limited health resources. Both pointed out that services need to reflect the local culture and their development must involve partnerships and involvement with communities. These were also points raised by Elaine Ballard from Speech Sciences at the University of Auckland, when she discussed a research project on early language development in Samoan speaking children. She reflected on some of the cultural issues that had influenced the research and the need to involve people who had knowledge of local culture.

Services and treatments for hearing loss include provision of hearing aids and audiological testing which are expensive and need specialised skills. Mike Sharp and Shanly Francis from Phonak (NZ) described some of the challenges that Phonak had faced in their regular visits Fiji to fit hearing aids to children, and identified the need to have in-country hearing aid services that provided a sustainable service that met the local needs, rather than relying on visiting services. Grant Searchfield of the University of Auckland gave an account of the changing hearing aid technology and how there is an increasing focus on developing countries and the design of good quality, well-priced hearing aids that were appropriate for the challenging environments of the Pacific (such as the high temperatures and humidity) and could be fitted without reliance on a highly skilled workforce. According to Ellen Giles from the University of Auckland, linking clinicians from other centres for diagnostic and rehabilitation support through “teleaudiology” can potentially solve some of the workforce and expertise issues and provide clinical support to remote Pacific communities.

Overall the meeting was a great success. It highlighted the enormous need for hearing-related services in Pacific countries and whilst the presenters exposed the many challenges to development of these services, they also provided ideas on how to overcome these through good planning, partnerships and long-term commitment.