



Nurse, Tugali Hospital, Solomon Islands.  
Image courtesy of Erin Gleeson, AusAID 2012

## Improving capacity for nurses' critical role in child health in Pacific Island Countries

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### Key Messages

- Child health nurses can play a critical role in improving child health outcomes in the Pacific Islands.
- There are currently too few child health nurses. This means that many children are not able to access a child health nurse, while existing child health nurses are chronically overworked.
- A local training course in child health is a cost-effective and appropriate option to expand the child health nursing workforce. Almost all resources required for this course are already available.

With the final push to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4, to reduce child mortality, there is increasing recognition of the need for strong health systems and comprehensive child health programs in the poorest countries in the Pacific. The targets set for MDG 4 are challenging for many countries in the Pacific region, and have not been matched by a sustainable workforce with the knowledge and skills to address the increasing complexity of child health.<sup>1</sup>

In the Pacific region the ratio of doctors to population is among the lowest in the world: there are 11 doctors per 100,000 people in the Solomon Islands and in Papua New Guinea (PNG) there are seven doctors per 100,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Access to centralised medical facilities is also a challenge, with 70% of the population in Solomon Islands and 87% of the population in Papua New Guinea living in remote or very remote areas.

In many Pacific Island countries nurses provide the majority of frontline care for seriously ill children. In these contexts, nursing staff can also be required to manage children's wards, train junior staff, coordinate provincial and district health programs and provide comprehensive primary health care often in the absence of a doctor.

Despite the critical role of trained child health nurses, there are currently inadequate numbers with postgraduate training across the Pacific.<sup>2,3</sup> PNG is currently the only country in the Pacific with an advanced child health nursing course, although four courses were offered previously. Over the past two decades the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health has sent a number of nurses to PNG to complete this course.

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## POLICY BRIEF

In 2011 we undertook a study to examine the role of these Solomon Islands child health nurses. With the Ministry of Health we identified 21 nurses who had completed postgraduate qualifications in child health. These nurses were mostly employed in senior clinical, administrative and teaching positions and reported the multiple tasks they had to perform and an often overwhelming workload.

### Local training for child health nurses in Pacific Island countries

Increasing the number of child health nurses in PNG and Pacific countries is a high priority. However, there is a need for accessible training that is relevant to local disease burdens and health priorities. A distance learning course through the University of Sydney has been offered; however, this is less relevant to the Pacific Islands context with the focus on acute paediatric care in a well-resourced tertiary hospital setting.<sup>2</sup> It is also prohibitively expensive.

Postgraduate child health nursing courses are under development in the Solomon Islands and Fiji. These courses will provide low cost, accessible and appropriate training.

In the Solomon Islands and Fiji, most of the resources required for local training courses are available, including infrastructure and technical expertise. Course content can be based on existing, widely-available training resources and standards from agencies including the World Health Organization and UNICEF.

These courses will require two or three clinical nurse educators trained at master's level to deliver postgraduate-level training for 15 to 20 child health nurses each year.<sup>2</sup> Assisting this would be a strong contribution from Australian institutions; however, the courses must be independent and not tied too closely to Australian models of postgraduate training. Establishing these courses would have a major impact on child health in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. This model can be replicated throughout the Pacific Island countries.

### Policy recommendations

- Supporting local training courses in child health is a cost-effective way to improve child health in Pacific Island countries.
- A locally appropriate and relevant curriculum with acute, primary and public health components is key to advancing skills needed for child health in the Pacific region.
- Support is needed to advance the training of nurse educators to deliver a postgraduate-level course. Nurse educators should receive training at master's level. This could be offered through Australian universities; however, the models of the course training must be Pacific-focused.

### References

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