

Health Care on Air

Using the Radio to Provide Primary Healthcare (PHC) Nurses in the Pacific with Training on COVID-19

Introduction:

The Pacific region is home to over 5,861 qualified nurses and midwives who deliver a range of primary healthcare (PHC) services that include conducting home visits to young children and their families. Most of these workers are located in remote areas with limited phone and internet connectivity, which makes it difficult for them to access regular in-service training and professional development opportunities (UNICEF, 2020). This has also made it challenging for them to obtain up-to-date information on how to protect themselves and manage the spread of COVID-19 in their communities. To address this problem, the Pacific Governments, together with [UNICEF](#) and the Governments of the United States, New Zealand, and Japan, launched [Health Care on Air](#), a distance education program that equips PHC nurses with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to protect themselves and deliver quality healthcare services to young children and their families during COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020).



Overview of Health Care on Air



Public health care nurse, Vasiti Naio, uses her mobile phone radio to listen to the Health Care on Air programme with other nurses

Launched on July 06, 2020, Health Care on Air aims to reach PHC nurses in remote rural areas and outer islands in 13 countries and equip them with the most up-to-date health knowledge on COVID-19.¹ Its training curriculum consists of forty-one 30-minute episodes that are broadcasted over a six month period via radio.² Each episode covers a different topic related to COVID-19, such as guidance on how to correctly wear and remove personal protective equipment (PPE), information on how to cope with stress during the pandemic, and advice on how to prevent the spread of the virus when COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed in a community (Khan, 2020). At the end of each episode, PHC nurses are presented with a series of questions pertaining to the information that was covered. To answer these questions, they must use their mobile phones to complete a one-time registration on UNICEF's Rapid Pro platform, a two-way communication system that works with free SMS and messaging applications from smartphones, which enables them to send an SMS with their response after each episode. If the questions are answered correctly, they receive 0.5 credit points per episode that go towards the renewal of their annual nursing license (UNICEF, 2020). The Rapid Pro platform also provides nurses with summaries of previous episodes and allows them to exchange information with one another and ask questions for future episodes.

¹ The 13 countries include: Fiji, Cook Islands, Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Tuvalu, Niue, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, Republic of Marshall Islands and Tokelau.

² The 41 episodes were developed through a collaborative effort with UNICEF, the Joint Incident Management Team (JIMT) Training Pillar, the Pacific Community (SPC), the Pacific Island News Association (PINA), and the Pacific Heads of Nursing

Enablers and Barriers to Implementation

As of October 2021, Health Care on Air's program had successfully been implemented in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Vanuatu. Overall, its episodes have proven to be an easy and convenient way of providing PHC nurses with training and knowledge that they otherwise would not have had access to. Workers who received the training noted that it had helped increase their confidence in being able to protect themselves and manage suspected COVID-19 cases in their communities (UNICEF, 2020). They also stated that the Rapid Pro platform provided them with the flexibility to revisit previously covered themes and concepts and answer the questions at the end of each episode at their own pace. Lastly, PHC nurses noted that the credit points they receive after listening to each episode has created a path for them to grow professionally and improve their performance during the pandemic.

Despite the overall success of Health Care on Air, the program faced a number of challenges during its initial phase of implementation. For example, at the beginning of COVID-19, the transition to remote work coupled with limited internet connectivity in some areas made it difficult for different actors (e.g., the Ministry of Health, radio service providers) to reach agreements with one another when developing the program. Additionally, scheduling conflicts sometimes prevented PHC nurses from listening to Health Care on Air's episodes when they were being aired. In response to this issue, program officials made the episodes available on the Internet of Good Things, a communication tool that hosts mobile-packaged content from UNICEF and its partners and is designed to make life-saving and life-improving information available for free (UNICEF Global Innovation Fund, 2019). This allows PHC nurses to use their mobile phones to revisit all episodes at a time that is most convenient for them.

Health Care on Air's Impact

The Pacific region's experience with Health Care on Air highlights the importance of exploring alternate ways of training frontline workers, particularly those who do not have reliable access to traditional training methods (e.g., in person or over the internet). Additionally, creating an avenue for PHC nurses to renew their licenses remotely ensures that they are able to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to advance in their careers during the pandemic. As the program expands to other countries in the Pacific, it could evolve into a model that also allows frontline workers to use the radio to disseminate important health information to members of their community during times of crises and beyond.

References

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