

Tonga Dental Officer In-service Periodontal Disease Training Program



Rampant periodontal disease in the Tonga population has called for an in-service training program to upskill Tongan dental officers in the management of periodontal disease. This request was initiated by the former Chief Dental Officer, Dr Amanaki Fakakovikaetou (FICD) and is continuing under the supervision of the current Chief Dental Officer (CDO), Dr Sisilia Fusi Fifita (FICD). In view of the importance of this project, there was a need for scientific rigor in the planning and gathering of scientific evidence with the intention for potential translation of similar in-service training to other developing countries in the South Pacific. The research project planning involved significant input from the CDO Tonga, the Ministry of Health Tonga, the Tonga National Health Ethics Research Committee, the Prime Minister's Office and the College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences (CPHMVS) at James Cook University (JCU).

Following discussions with the Late Emeritus Professor Peter Leggat, it was decided that the rigorous testing of this program will be best served by a PhD level research program with a primary investigator and a team of advisors headed by Emeritus Professor Peter Leggat as the primary supervisor and helped by a team of secondary supervisors, namely, Professor Dileep Sharma (FICD), Dr Joao Martins de Mello Neto (College of Medicine and Dentistry, James Cook University) and Dr Daniel Lindsay (Biostatistician, University of Queensland) working under the guidance of Dr Sisilia Fifita, the Chief Dental Officer of Tonga and Dr Naati Fakatava, the Head of the newly set-up periodontal unit in Tonga.

Sadly, Emeritus Professor Peter Leggat passed away in September 2023. This was a tragic loss to the public health community and our team. We miss his expertise and wise guidance. As a fitting tribute to him, 'The Emeritus Professor Peter Leggat Memorial Fund' was set up by JCU in his honour to fund a scholarship to assist undergraduate students. The new primary supervisor is Associate Professor Lars Henning from the CPHMVS-JCU.



A literature search revealed that a total of nine studies related to the prevalence of periodontal disease was conducted in Tonga and neighbouring countries from 1956 to 2021. The studies highlighted that periodontal disease was prevalent in Tonga and the South Pacific Islands but there were no plans to manage periodontal disease initiated by the primary investigators nor by the respective national Ministries of Health. We have noted a change in approach



in recent times with a Tonga Ministry of Health initiative to gather research information regarding the prevalence of disease as well as to formulate a plan to manage the disease as part of the project. There is also a call to provide in-service training emphasised by the CDO Tonga.

Section VIII of the International College of Dentists has provided a funding grant for this project. Covid-19 'lockdowns' caused a delay in commencement of this project. The five day training program finally commenced on November 13th at the Vaiola Hospital Dental Clinic.

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