

Health Outreach on the Cook Islands

Proposal Summary:

With the assistance of the Second Decade Society's Walsh Award I propose to spend a year on the Cook Islands conducting health outreach efforts. Through peer-education in communities and school systems I intend to raise awareness of the sexually transmitted infection (STI) epidemic across the South Pacific. By promoting preventative and safe sex practices and advocating health-seeking behaviors I will be able to help alleviate the burden of preventable disease within a small population that will see both immediate and long-term benefits from the campaign.

About the Cook Islands:

The Cook Islands are a chain of 15 islands located in the Pacific Ocean, approximately halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii. The resident population of roughly 12,000 is largely centered on the main island of Rarotonga, an elevated, fertile volcanic island spanning 67 square kilometers. Cook Islanders use English as the official language but also speak the native Polynesian Maori as well.

Targeted Problem:

One in four sexually active young people in the South Pacific region has a sexually transmitted infection (STI). There is an exceptionally high prevalence of chlamydia in particular, affecting 20% of the sexually active population. Complications from chlamydia include pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy and infertility. It also adversely affects newborns, causing conjunctivitis and pneumonia. Syphilis too is quite prevalent, causing congenital transmission and increasing the risk for miscarriage or stillbirth. Further, HIV is facilitated by the presence of *any* STI. It is currently not a widespread problem but is threatening due to these other conditions.

To this point health communication in the Pacific region has focused largely on the facets of HIV but not sexual health in general. The Cook Islands specifically have started to conduct some community outreach and life skills-based peer education but these programs are not comprehensive and are struggling to translate knowledge into behavior change. The STI epidemic affecting this small population is placing an incredible burden on the limited health resources available in the region. The number of fetal deaths caused worldwide by syphilis and chlamydia rival those of parent to child transmission of HIV, but these deaths are entirely *preventable!*

How It Will Work:

The Pacific Regional STI Working Group has recommended targeted health communication campaigns to increase awareness of high local rates and promote preventative and safe sexual behavior. Once I've arrived in Rarotonga I'll begin a partnership with the Ministry of Health's Health Protection Unit to do just that. This branch of the Ministry is responsible for protecting the population from communicable diseases, notably STIs. I've been in contact with the division's coordinator and have been assured that I would be a most welcomed addition to their staff and would be granted working space as well as needed resources.

One component of my proposal is health education in the school systems. There are 14 schools across the island of Rarotonga, half of which would be suitable for sexual health campaigns based on age, with a total of about 1,350 students. As in the United States, sexual education begins during the middle school years and is based on many of the same principles. The curriculum focuses on an approach to help students understand their natural development, health relationships and reproductive health. I will be able to go into the schools when such units are taking place to further discuss sexual health, with particular focus on simple preventative measures as a way to combat the STI epidemic that plagues the country. Outreach in the school systems will provide another dimension to the current sexual education efforts by making it more of a forum to address questions and dispel rumors.

However, prevention is only a small facet of this proposal due to the fact that there is already such a prevalence of STIs. Greater attention must be paid to promote health-seeking behaviors, including counseling, testing, and treatment. This is where the second aspect of the proposal will take place. Using the Ministry's databases, I'll be able to target specific communities where I can make contact to educate and disseminate information on available resources. By approaching individuals as peers and engaging them in discussions about sexual health, not only will I better be able to help them but I'll also gain a greater understanding of the target population's point of view. Over the span of the year I plan on developing an in-depth understanding of local customs, practices and beliefs that will assist change. Knowing about socio-cultural values, beliefs and social norms makes it possible to tailor outreach to be more effective. Community outreach and engagement removes social stigma about disease and will empower people to help themselves realize better health.

One of most important aspects of this plan is that the targeted population is small and quite accessible. There is the very real possibility of affecting great change over the course of a year. Success will be measured in terms of changing community incidence and prevalence rates as well as clinic visits for care and treatment. This plan will increase community information and resource availability immediately while implementing a solid and replicable program for the Ministry of Health to maintain in the future. Through peer-education I will raise awareness of local problems and prevalence rates, promote prevention whenever possible, and advocate health-seeking behavior as well.

Personal Attributes:

There are two components to making this proposal effective. The first is a true desire to promote healthy living. As a Public Health major here at Johns Hopkins, it seems impossible not to possess this trait. For the past two years I've been a Peer Health Educator on campus, as well as serving on the Peer Health Advisory Board. The aims of these groups are to increase campus awareness and knowledge of collegiate health issues through counseling, programming and outreach. The format of this proposal is based largely on the skills and experiences I've accumulated over my time as a peer educator.

The other key to real success for this proposal is a genuine love for meeting and interacting with others. I'm undoubtedly a people person. I've worked extensively with youths of all ages, through coaching, mentoring, and teaching as well as engaging adults in these same activities. I heartily enjoy sharing my knowledge with people and relish the opportunity whenever it appears.

Why This Is Important:

This award presents an extraordinary opportunity, both for myself and for the people of the Cook Islands. For myself, I hope to complete my Master's degree in Public Health before setting out on a career focused on health education. The experience gained through this proposal would enhance not only my academic pursuits but would provide a strong foundation for later career efforts. More importantly though, this proposal has sweeping implications for the Cook Islanders. It's not often that population health can be altered in a short time but here it is entirely possible. With a small concentrated population facing an epidemic, I see the opportunity to serve others and affect positive change. I've always wanted to travel abroad to apply what I've learned here at Johns Hopkins and performing health outreach on the Cook Islands would be an incredible opportunity to fulfill this goal.

Anticipated Project Budget**Airfare:**

From Baltimore-Washington International to Los Angeles \$400 roundtrip
From Los Angeles to Rarotonga \$3,000 roundtrip

Total Airfare Expenses: \$3,400

Housing:

Long-term Bungalow Housing \$500 a month

Total Housing Expense \$6,000

Food & Living Expenses:

Per Diem rate \$10 a day
Incidentals annually \$500

Total Living Expense \$4,150

Project Expenses:

Office supplies and teaching materials \$1,000

Paperwork:

Visa Application \$250

Anticipated Project Budget: \$14,800

*All values in US Dollars