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STRENGTHENING HEALTH SECURITY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: REFLECTIONS FROM PACIFIC ANGEL 2024-1

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The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences' (USU's) Center for Global Health Engagement (CGHE) is pleased to share the fifteenth issue of the Department of Defense Global Health Engagement (DoD GHE) Snapshot. The DoD GHE Snapshot is intended to create self-publishing opportunities for GHE professionals to share knowledge and experiences and learn from one another in real time. We hope you enjoy and please refer to our social media and website for real time updates.

STRENGTHENING HEALTH SECURITY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: REFLECTIONS FROM PACIFIC ANGEL 2024-1



International collaboration is essential for effectively addressing shared vulnerabilities, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises. Pacific Angel 2024-1, a multinational medical engagement held in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in August 2024, demonstrated how collaborative partnerships significantly enhance disaster response capabilities and health resilience. The event united medical teams from the United States Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), Wisconsin Air National Guard (WI ANG) State Partnership Program (SPP), Air Force Reserve Command, Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), Australia's Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), and the French Armed Forces of New Caledonia, underscoring the critical role multinational cooperation plays in addressing complex health challenges in strategically important regions.

MUTUAL LEARNING AND SKILL EXCHANGE

At the heart of Pacific Angel was a commitment to reciprocal learning rather than a traditional instructor-student dynamic. Medical subject matter expert exchanges covered aeromedical evacuation, search and rescue integrated with austere medicine, mental health, community resiliency, and public health practices to reduce vector-borne and communicable diseases. PNGDF healthcare professionals provided invaluable insights into austere medicine, particularly infection control and medical supply rationing—skills essential in remote or resource-limited settings. In return, U.S. teams, notably WI ANG medical personnel with civilian healthcare backgrounds, shared expertise in trauma care, ophthalmology, orthopedics, and mental health.

Practical tools and resources were essential for mission success. Portable WiFi pucks facilitated communication but highlighted limitations due to weak signals in remote areas, underscoring the need for more reliable communication solutions. Shoreland Travax and the TRICARE Medical Capability Report were instrumental in developing medical placemats, force health protection measures, and pre-coordinating health support. Adaptive management was critical, as PNG's rugged terrain and logistical challenges required flexibility and creative problem-solving. Participants swiftly adjusted strategies to available resources and local conditions, ensuring practical and effective solutions.

Pacific Angel 2024-1 achieved impressive outcomes. Ninety percent of local public health professionals reported increased confidence in disease surveillance, vector data collection, and control measures. Participants' confidence in trauma management under resource limitations increased by 40%, and 85% reported enhanced preparedness for mental health interventions, particularly in post-disaster scenarios. To sustain these outcomes, a five-year roadmap for PNGDF medical activities was updated, guided by an Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Framework, ensuring continued benefits for PNG's healthcare system.

A crucial lesson from Pacific Angel was the importance of early partnerships and culturally sensitive communication. In PNG, where politeness and respect are paramount, direct refusals are often avoided, potentially causing misunderstandings. Recognizing this nuance, teams emphasized observing non-verbal cues, encouraging open dialogue, and prioritizing face-to-face interactions. Informal conversations and thorough prior research on partner organizations further strengthened relationships, laying the groundwork for lasting collaboration.

Capacity building through technology transfer was another vital pillar. Rather than merely donating medical equipment, the mission emphasized training local healthcare professionals to independently operate and maintain equipment. Biomedical engineers played a significant role, ensuring equipment functionality and local personnel confidence. Establishing ongoing technical support channels was identified as essential for long-term sustainability.



STRATEGIC COORDINATION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

To optimize resources and avoid duplication, future health engagements within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region should be strategically coordinated. Aligning PACAF's efforts with existing programs such as U.S. Army Pacific's Exercise Balikatan and Pacific Fleet's Pacific Partnership operations ensures complementary rather than redundant activities. While redundancy should be minimized, some overlap in critical areas like trauma care and public health management can reinforce skills and strengthen local expertise.

PNG, one of the world's most disaster-prone countries, has great potential to become a regional leader in humanitarian assistance and disaster response. Frequent earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, droughts, floods, and disease outbreaks have driven PNG to develop strong disaster-response expertise. Wisconsin's SPP can leverage academic and private-sector partnerships to strengthen PNG's civilian-military health collaboration, addressing healthcare disparities by expanding oncology, cardiology, emergency medicine, and ophthalmology services at Port Moresby General Hospital.

Pacific Angel 2024-1 serves as a powerful example of how collaborative partnerships, mutual learning, adaptive management, and strategic coordination significantly enhance health security. By prioritizing reciprocal exchanges, culturally sensitive communication, and sustainable capacity-building, this mission provides a model for future engagements. As health-related challenges become increasingly complex worldwide, embracing these lessons will be crucial for building resilient communities, enhancing international partnerships, and ensuring effective responses to future health threats.



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