Towards improved Rheumatic Heart Disease control and prevention in Fiji Islands

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Introduction. Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) is a significant health problem in Fiji Islands with the Pacific region having among the highest reported RHD prevalence in the world. It is common for children to present late with severe RHD. Episodes of acute rheumatic fever (ARF) are often unrecognised by families and health practitioners. The Fiji Islands RHD Control and Prevention project is a four year initiative led by Cure_Kids, a New Zealand (NZ) based charity that funds child health research, in collaboration with the Fiji Ministry of Health (MOH), Auckland District Health Board (Starship Hospital and Auckland Regional Public Health Service), and the Centre for International Child Health at Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. Joint funding of NZD $3,109,564 is provided by the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Cure_Kids.

Methods. The Project has four key areas: (1) a national register-based secondary prevention programme; (2) development of best practice guidelines for clinical care; (3) a national model for early case detection; and (4) ARF primary prevention and health promotion strategy. The Project will facilitate co-ordination of all ARF/RHD activities, integration into existing services and models of care, and development of new models of care with the aim of creating sustainable and effective ARF/RHD control in Fiji. Fundamental to the Project outputs is an effective national co-ordination structure for the Fiji RHD Control Programme (Fiji MOH). Increasing capacity at this level will provide a governance model that can continue beyond the life of the Project. The effectiveness of the Project will be evaluated via monitoring outcomes associated with each of the areas. These include the effectiveness of the register based approach to deliver benzathine penicillin, monitoring of ARF/RHD incidence and prevalence, improved diagnosis and management of patients with ARF/RHD, improved public awareness of ARF/RHD and understanding of appropriate health seeking behaviour. Additional long-term outcome measures include incidence, prevalence, morbidity, and mortality. Year 1 focuses on establishing a baseline against which programme effectiveness can be measured.

Conclusions. The Project, with its multiple partners, has the potential to contribute substantially to the development of a sustainable ARF/RHD programme and infrastructure in Fiji Islands.