

SPEECH of Dr Shigeru Omi, WHO regional director for the Western Pacific

HALO, WELKAM [VANUATU], TALOFA LAVA [SAMOA]. MALO E LELEI [TONGA]. FAKALOFA LAHI ATU [NIUE] NI SA BULA VINAKA [FIJI]. NAMASTE [FIJI INDIAN]. KIA ORANA [COOK ISLANDS]. IA ORANA [TAHITI]. GUD DE TRU OLGETA [PAPUA NEW GUINEA – MELANESIAN] TALOHA NI [TOKELAU], TALOFA [TUVALU] KIA ORA TATOU [NZ MAORI]

WARM PACIFIC GREETINGS TO YOU ALL.

Let me begin by thanking our Pacific hosts. Special greetings to our invited dignitaries from our Pasifika motherlands, and from around the world.

I am delighted to be here today for the official launch of the WHO Pacific Islands Mental Health Network. I would like to convey the best wishes of the WHO Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan, for the launch of the network and its ongoing work.

It is wonderful that this launch coincides with the meeting of Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries since the network was established following the previous meeting of Ministers of Health held in Samoa in 2005.

The WHO Pacific Islands Mental Health Network is a vehicle for countries that share existing geographical, social, and cultural relationships to work together to address common difficulties and issues. For example, we know there is a growing mental health burden in the Pacific, including high suicide rates and drug and alcohol abuse problems, but we don't have adequate mental health services to meet the challenge. But working together, network countries have the opportunity to draw on collective experiences, knowledge and resources in an effort to improve their mental health situation.

Today, 13 Pacific island countries are members of the network, which operates through National Focal Contacts who serve as the first point of contact for the World Health Organization.

Network members participated in a competition last year to develop a logo and slogan for the network. We had a great response, with entries received from all walks of Pacific island life, including school children. I'm sure you will agree that the winning slogan and logo beautifully represent the network.

While the network is being officially launched today, it already has been actively working with network member countries to initiate projects that will ultimately lead to improved mental health services in the Pacific. All of this is possible thanks to a three-year grant from New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). I'd like to publicly acknowledge that support and in particular thank NZAID, its Executive Director Dr Peter Adams. The launching of this network reflects your commitment to make significant gains in mental health in this region. Without your support, the network would not have been able to get off to such a good start.

I want to briefly highlight several key components of the WHO Pacific Islands Mental Health Network, which is intended to build sustainable national and regional capacity in relation to mental health.

An initial activity of the network is to prepare country-based human resource plans in order to improve the skills of health workers in providing treatment and care to people with mental disorders. At present, a rapid assessment is under way to assess current mental health service and workforce needs in network countries.

At the same time, the network is developing a comprehensive mental health information package for key competencies, based on best practice guidelines from around the world. This package will be ready to use in countries by the end of the year.

In June, WHO will be facilitating a training workshop on mental health policy and planning with the network's member countries to help them start work on their own mental health policies and plans.

In addition, the network is also working to identify and engage strategic partners. These are organizations or individuals that could contribute technically, financially and politically to make the network even more successful in countries.

I have great confidence that the WHO Pacific Islands Mental Health Network presents a tremendous opportunity to overcome many of the challenges facing Pacific island countries in providing appropriate mental health services to their people. I thank you all for your role in creating and supporting this network.