

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Inquiry into matters relating to the Torres Strait region

October 2009

Submission from the Department of Health and Ageing

1 Introduction

This submission outlines key areas of activity and cooperation between the Department of Health and Ageing and Papua New Guinea (PNG)/Torres Strait Treaty Zone. It focuses on parts c) and d) of the Terms of Reference for the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into Matters relating to the Torres Strait Region, namely:

- the extent of cooperation with and between Australia's northern neighbours (specifically Papua New Guinea) in relation to the health portfolio (see section 3)
- the public health challenges facing this region with respect to the maintenance of border security across the Torres Strait region; and cooperation between federal, state and local levels of government (see section 4).

The Department's key engagement with PNG is through the Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC) which the Department chairs. This submission outlines the HIC's activities, in particular the recent Package of Measures and other initiatives such as the Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project and broader support in the region, for example the Pacific Senior Health Officials Network.

2 Overview of the long term health-related activity with northern neighbours

Australia's key interest in the relationship with PNG lies in using Australia's aid program to promote development and stability. At a Departmental level the relationship is managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and AusAID. The Department of Health and Ageing's main interests are protecting Australia's northern borders from risks associated with the spread of communicable disease, and reducing the burden placed on Queensland Health Services in the Torres Strait.

PNG villages in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone face pressing health concerns brought about by poor sanitation, poor water quality and limited disease control. Local health services suffer from inadequate infrastructure, shortages in staff and clinical supplies and have limited diagnostic capacity. These factors result in high levels of communicable disease occurring in the PNG Western Province, including mosquito-borne disease such as malaria, sexually transmissible infections (STIs), tuberculosis (TB), multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) and typhoid. PNG also has a higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS compared to Australia, while the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the Western Province is not high as PNG, this continues to be an issue that needs to be carefully managed.

As a consequence of poor levels of health care provided, PNG citizens, mostly those from the Torres Strait Treaty villages, continue to travel into Australia to access health clinics in the Treaty Zone – especially on Saibai and Boigu Islands – that are in close proximity to the PNG coast. Under the Treaty, in 2008-09 there were 59,000 recorded movements between PNG and Australia. Given present and growing rates of communicable disease in the Western Province, this movement presents a burden on Torres Strait health services and increased risk of communicable diseases for Australian communities in the Torres Strait and on the mainland.

While the provisions in the Torres Strait Treaty do not permit travel for health purposes, clinics operated by Queensland Health on Australian islands in the Torres Strait provide health services to visiting PNG nationals on humanitarian grounds. In the 2009-10 Budget, the Australian Government provided \$16.2 million over four years to continue funding to contribute to Queensland Health's costs of treating visiting PNG nationals. Under the Australian Health Care Agreement between the Commonwealth and Queensland, the Australian Government provided \$2,690,368 indexed annually for 2003-2008 (extended by mutual agreement to June 2009) in recognition of the increased burden on health services arising from the Treaty. In the 2009-10 Budget, the Australian Government provided \$16.2 million over four years to continue funding towards Queensland Health's costs of treating visiting PNG nationals.

The Torres Strait Islanders are similarly disadvantaged in their comparative economic and health indices, although the profile of illness is very different. Where major burden of illness in PNG arises from communicable disease, Torres Strait Islander (TSI) health is primarily compromised by non-communicable 'chronic' disease and high levels of trauma. Health Services in the Torres Strait are the responsibility of Queensland Health.

3 Cooperation with PNG

Continued close cooperation with respect to public health with Papua New Guinea in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone remains a priority for the Australian Government especially because of the challenges associated with the unique free movement arrangements which apply in that region, including the potential for spread of communicable diseases.

Australia and PNG cooperate through their respective health authorities to ensure sustainable health outcomes on both sides of the border. The Health and Ageing cooperation arrangements in the Torres Strait region is primarily through the Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (or HIC).

Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC)

The Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC) was established in 2003 as a subcommittee of the Joint Advisory Council on the Implementation of the Torres Strait Treaty to examine health issues associated with the free movement of PNG nationals and Torres Strait Islanders.

The HIC's objectives are to strengthen the health service capacity in the Torres Strait and Western Province of PNG and increase surveillance of communicable diseases in the Treaty Zone. It also identifies practical improvements to address cross border health concerns in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone.

The HIC is chaired by the Department of Health and Ageing, and membership comprises representatives from the Australian Government (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID, AQIS, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, and the Torres Strait Regional Authority), the Queensland Government (Departments of Health, and Premier and Cabinet), and PNG Government agencies.

3.1 Package of Measures

In 2008 the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum tasked HIC to develop a Package of Measures to address cross-border health concerns. A draft Package of Measures was presented to the 2009 Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum (Attachment A), and it is anticipated that the final Package and update on implementation will be presented to the 2010 Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum.

The HIC has taken concrete steps to develop the joint Australia-PNG Package of Measures which includes a range of short, medium and longer term activities designed to strengthen health service capacity and improve surveillance and communications in both the Western

Province of PNG and the Torres Strait. When fully implemented, it is envisaged that the Package will lead to better access to health services in the Torres Strait and Western Province of PNG and thereby reduce the incidence and transmission of communicable diseases.

The Department of Health and Ageing has consulted with all agencies involved with the HIC on the development of the Package. This has included productive consultations with government agencies in PNG to develop the joint government proposal.

At this stage, finalisation of the Package is dependent on the PNG Government identifying funding for its components. The PNG Government is expected to consider funding for elements of the Package of Measures as part of their 2010 Budget process.

Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy

The Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy forms part of the Australian Government's contribution to the joint Australia–PNG Package of Measures. The Australian Government has committed \$13.8 million over four years in the 2009-10 Budget to the Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy.

The Strategy has three core elements:

1. **Extension of clinic facilities and staff housing on Saibai Island** and development and implementation of a culturally appropriate **sexual health education campaign**. Key pieces of work that could achieve these elements of the Strategy include:
 - recruitment of staff to provide for the delivery of HIV/AIDS and STI clinical support in the Torres Strait
 - the development, implementation and evaluation of a culturally appropriate sexual health campaign in the Torres Strait
 - expansion of facilities at the Saibai Island clinic to support the delivery of primary health care services to Torres Strait Islanders and Papua New Guineans
 - construction of new staff accommodation.

The clinic extension work has been in response to growing demands being placed on the capacity of the clinic by a combination of normal Saibai community requirements and PNG nationals visiting Saibai under Treaty visitor arrangements. On completion, this project will ensure that Saibai Island residents are able to access health care services when needed.

2. **Ongoing Torres Strait Communications Officer position to facilitate cross-border sharing of clinical and disease surveillance information**. The Torres Strait Communications Officer gathers and consolidates clinical and surveillance data derived from Torres Strait island clinics and other Queensland Health facilities in relation to PNG nationals diagnosed and treated in Australia. The position constitutes the Australian end of the conduit for the cross-border exchange of clinical information relating to PNG nationals accessing health care services in the Torres Strait and hospitals at Thursday Island, Cairns and Townsville, and is the result of cooperation between the different levels of government in both Australia and PNG.
3. **Joint Australian Government-Queensland Government mosquito control program in the Torres Strait**. This initiative allows for continued support towards mosquito detection, control and elimination measures in the Torres Strait region - in particular in relation to exotic mosquitoes (including *Aedes albopictus*) capable of spreading dengue fever. The program also aims to prevent the spread of these mosquitoes through mainland Australia.

Queensland Health continues to maintain a *cordon sanitaire* around the major transport hub of the region; the cluster of islands including Thursday, Horn, Hammond and Prince of Wales Islands. The focus of the program is the survey and pre-emptive control to ensure the maintenance of an *Aedes albopictus*-free transport hub, and the reversion of mosquito control responsibility on the outer islands to the Torres Strait Islands Regional Council.

Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project

At the 2008 Australia – PNG Ministerial Forum, the Australian Government committed \$561,000 towards a Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project. The project is a joint undertaking of the Australian Government (AusAID), the Queensland Government, the Government of PNG and the Western Province (PNG) Administration, with assistance from the Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organization. While AusAID funds the Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project, the Department of Health and Ageing, as chair of the HIC, oversees the project's implementation.

This project has three main focus areas:

- strengthening PNG's ability to diagnose both TB and MDR-TB through laboratory development and staff training
- improving the diagnosis and treatment of TB at a clinical level in the Western Province, PNG, including at Daru General Hospital
- conducting a drug resistance survey based on sputum samples provided by Daru General Hospital to determine the prevalence of multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) in the region.

The Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) will be able to undertake culturing and sensitivity testing for the differential diagnosis of TB/MDR-TB for the whole of PNG. This is considered to be a key capacity in developing effective treatment of TB and MDR-TB in the Western Province of PNG. While work on improving arrangements at the CPHL have progressed, there have been delays in finalising funding sources to facilitate full implementation of the TB project. Through the HIC, the Department of Health and Ageing is continuing to progress this initiative.

A communication protocol is being finalised by the Torres Strait Communications Officer to facilitate the exchange of clinical information across the international border and will enable follow-up and treatment of PNG nationals diagnosed with TB at Torres Strait Island clinics at home in PNG. It will also aid in the tracking and identification of PNG nationals who have been diagnosed with MDR-TB at Torres Strait Island clinics to ensure they are followed up for treatment within the Australian health system until such time as this capacity is built in the Western Province. In addition, the Western Province Communications Officer has commenced provision of clinical outreach visits to village aid posts and health centres along the South Fly Coast to provide support in the follow-up and treatment of PNG nationals originally diagnosed with TB in Torres Strait island clinics.

Communications

Through the HIC, work is progressing towards installing a telecommunications interface that will allow clinical workers within the Torres Strait Treaty Zone to communicate more easily and in real time. This system will allow calls from telephones to high frequency radios and vice versa. Licensing issues have been resolved which allows this facility to now be installed and operated. The HIC recently endorsed the shared telecommunications protocol governing use of this facility. This initiative is funded with \$34,871 from the Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project.

In addition, through the HIC the Department of Health and Ageing and Queensland Health are progressing a communications strategy to provide increased community awareness among Torres Strait Islanders and Treaty villagers as well as health sector workers in Australia and PNG. The strategy will focus on:

- correcting inaccurate community perceptions regarding the aims of the Package, the TB capacity building project and associated traditional inhabitant rights under the Treaty
- building confidence in Western Province health services
- explaining how the Australian and PNG Governments are working together to address health concerns in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone.

This activity does not attract any additional funding.

3.2 Other activities in the Torres Strait and region

The Department of Health and Ageing activities and cooperation in the Torres Strait and the region extend beyond PNG and the HIC, including the following key activities:

Torres Strait Sexual Health Strategy

In December 2007 the Department entered into a funding agreement with Queensland Health contributing \$1.26 million (GST exclusive) over five years (2007-08 to 2011-12) to a sexual health strategy for the Torres Strait – the Sexual Health Strategy. The Sexual Health Strategy will raise community awareness, knowledge and understanding of sexual health issues and will also provide those at risk with the information, services and health hardware required to prevent and control sexually transmissible infections and HIV.

The Sexual Health Strategy aims to build sufficient capacity in terms of resources and staff to implement effective sexual health promotion, prevention and treatment. It will be implemented by a network of registered nurse and health worker teams supported by project staff and the Tropical Public Health Unit based in Cairns.

Pacific Senior Health Officials Network (PSHON)

In 2004 the Department of Health and Ageing established PSHON to facilitate communication between senior health officials in the Pacific region. In the 2009 calendar year AusAID's Pacific Governance Support Program provided \$328,959 to support PSHON's activities.

The aim of PSHON is to support health system governance and the development and implementation of sound and effective health policies in Pacific Island countries. The Department of Health and Ageing chairs PSHON's annual meetings and members comprise the Ministries of Health from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, and a representative from the New Zealand Ministry of Health is invited to attend.

The PSHON meetings have been well received and attended by members. PSHON is helping with the development of improved governance in many health ministries, despite the real and ongoing infrastructure issues that they face. Visits by Australian representatives to the member countries (and vice versa) have proven to be a culturally effective way of providing information sources in areas such as health informatics and library services.

Regional Health Service program

The Regional Health Service program works with local communities to deliver appropriate services to meet identified needs. The program is funded by the Australian Government via existing health care services. This is funded via existing health care services - in 2008-09, the Torres Strait Regional Health Service, auspiced by the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsular Area Health Service District, Queensland Health, was provided funding of \$367,492.25 (GST exclusive). While it is not the intention of the program to directly support the cost of food/groceries in the Torres Strait it does support community identified primary health care priorities relating to the prevention and treatment of illness. The relevant

activities under this program include funding to Queensland Health for the development and maintenance of community gardens on three islands in the Torres Strait. This is a collaborative effort with local communities and other stakeholders, including schools. The community gardens encourage a focus on traditional food that is culturally appropriate, and also aims to address the impact of chronic disease in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the region.

Border security

Cross-border travel poses a number of challenges in delivering health services in the Torres Strait. Travel by health workers and other government officials dealing with Torres Strait Treaty matters between islands in the Torres Strait and Treaty villages along the South Fly Coast is both expensive and time consuming. In addition, Australian Torres Strait Island communities have expressed concerns about the potential cross-border spread of communicable diseases and the burden placed on limited health services and other island infrastructure by PNG nationals seeking access to Australian medical care and other services.

The Department of Health and Ageing and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry are looking at developing of better border health policies in the Torres Strait. This is currently being progressed in two key areas:

- A Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Health and Ageing for the delivery of human quarantine services at the Australian border which includes allowing those agencies to work together to screen travellers in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone for matters of human quarantine concern. This is not an additional screening procedure, but an effort to adapt existing procedures to better suit the methods of transport, cultural environment, health needs and treaty arrangements in the region. This activity is expected to commence in March 2010.
- The Department of Health and Ageing plans to conduct a broad examination of all border health policies and activities to identify how they could be revised to most effectively manage the quarantine risk particular to the circumstances in the Strait. This activity will be part of the development of a Border Health Measures Guide, and is planned to take place in 2010.

These activities do not attract any additional funding.

In addition, a proposal to facilitate border movements, endorsed by the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, which will allow health officials to travel directly between Saibai and Boigu Islands in the Torres Strait and Treaty villages in the South Fly has been referred to the PNG Minister for Foreign Affairs for endorsement prior to implementation of the scheme. This proposal will receive funding of \$5,000 per year until 2012-15, which is part of the Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy.

4 Challenges to delivering health solutions in the Torres Strait Treaty Zone

The success and progress of the Package of Measures and other programs outlined in this submission are dependent on cooperation between governments (both between Australian governments, and the Australian and PNG Governments).

Challenges to progressing health outcomes in the Torres Strait include:

- poor communication and coordination between various PNG national government agencies and between those agencies and provincial and district agencies
- PNG's changing funding arrangements - transfer of control over supplementary funding for infrastructure from the National Department of Health to the National Department of Planning and Monitoring, as access to supplementary budget funding is essential to PNG implementing the Package of Measures.