

## Communicable Diseases Tackled



*Participants at the Communicable Disease Control Symposium at the Millenia Hotel.*

Improving surveillance and response to Communicable Diseases in Samoa is the focus of a three-day symposium at the Millenia Hotel, Sogi which started yesterday.

Communicable diseases such as typhoid and dengue fever, influenza, tuberculosis, HIV and Chlamydia among many others, are those which can be transmitted from person to person.

Led by the Ministry of Health, the meeting was well attended by stakeholder providers for health in the public and private sector, including hospital doctors and nurses, laboratory workers, private GPs, public health inspectors and representatives from NGOs and community organisations.

The theme of “Communicable Disease Control – Our responsibility” underscores the need, now more than ever, for a collective and integrated approach to ensuring Samoa improves its capacity to monitor and control existing communicable diseases such as dengue and typhoid.

As well, the threat of emerging new diseases such as SARS and the chikungunya virus means countries such as Samoa needs to as much as possible, ensure it is able to detect these new diseases and respond quickly to prevent and minimize harm to its people.

CEO Palanitina Tupuimatagi Toelupe highlighted key challenges for the participants. “Whilst we have much to be proud of in our efforts, there is also much room for improvement. We must do away with the fragmented approaches.

“In responding to communicable diseases where time is of the essence, I remind all health workers, public and private, of their legal if not professional obligation to report incidence of communicable diseases and syndromes of importance, so that we may mobilize public health response quickly and effectively.”

She challenged that in this day of improved technology and resourcing, there is no excuse for national disease surveillance, monitoring and response capacities to not be in place and functioning well. The forum was lauded as a good opportunity to look at gaps and strengthen capacity and systems.

The World Health Organisation Epidemiologist and South Pacific Communicable Disease Advisor, Dr Jacob Kool, based in the WHO Office, Fiji is one of the presenters and resource persons at the symposium.

His presentations include an overview of the International Health Regulations (2005) of which Samoa and 192 other states are parties to, and its links with the communicable disease control efforts in country.

He also presents on a simplified but effective system of surveillance now being piloted in fourteen countries in the Pacific including American Samoa and Fiji.

This surveillance system is based on reporting of syndromes or symptoms, rather than diagnoses. This recognizes the limited capacities of laboratories in many Pacific Island countries to assist doctors in confirming diagnoses of some communicable diseases.

Reporting symptoms such as acute fever and rash, or diarrhea or influenza like illness allows public health workers to detect any rises in trends and appropriately investigate and instigate response measures.

One of the core outcomes of the symposium is the development of standard operating guidelines and treatment protocols for typhoid, a longstanding and endemic public health problem in Samoa, as well as improving overall reporting systems, data management and response to outbreak guidelines.

Last but not least of the symposium's aims is to devise systems and procedures to improve immunization coverage. For decades, Samoa has undertaken a national immunization program to ensure its population is protected from communicable diseases such as measles, whooping cough, rubella, pertussis, polio and tetanus.

A recent national survey found target population coverage for the immunization program had deteriorated to unacceptable low rates, as low as less than 30% overall coverage for fully immunized children during the year of survey.