

Gardening and Health: Let your garden be your health and your health be your garden

Health Promotion Forum's Senior Pacific Health Promotion Strategist Dr Viliami Puloka presented his thoughts on home-grown solutions to the Pacific's obesity problem at a conference in Wallis and Futuna in 2016.

Abstract: When Hippocrates, the father of medicine some 2,500 years ago said "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food", I can assure you he was not talking about fast food like Cheese burgers, Fizzy drinks and French fries.

He was talking about fresh produce from people's home gardens. Being the top physician of his time and a leading scientist in the field of medicine, he knew the importance of good healthy food in providing proper fuel for healthy living. Consumption of foods that are highly processed but empty of proper nutrients is one of the key drivers of the obesity and diabetes pandemic the world is facing today, including Wallis and Futuna.

The Wallis & Futuna Chronic Diseases Risk Factor Study in 2009 showed a 17% prevalence of diabetes, and an 87% prevalence of overweight and obesity among the study population.

Eating fresh food, locally grown in home gardens is a very good way to prevent and control



chronic diseases including diabetes and obesity. The health benefits of growing your own food are well documented. You are in control and decide what to grow. You are not dependent on food produced by someone you do not know, whose interest is your money not your health. Growing your own garden provides opportunities for physical

activity which goes hand in hand with good nutrition giving you good health. One can also enjoy fresh air and sunshine, which is good medicine for the whole person.

Wallis and Futuna is very fortunate to have such fertile soil, and many people still grow food in their own gardens. The challenge is the ever-increasing amount of readily available imported processed food that competes with traditional local cuisines.

I like to suggest that the way forward to good health through home gardening is to 'return to nature' and re-claim the socio-cultural and economic value of home gardening and... "Let your garden be your Health and your Health be your garden".

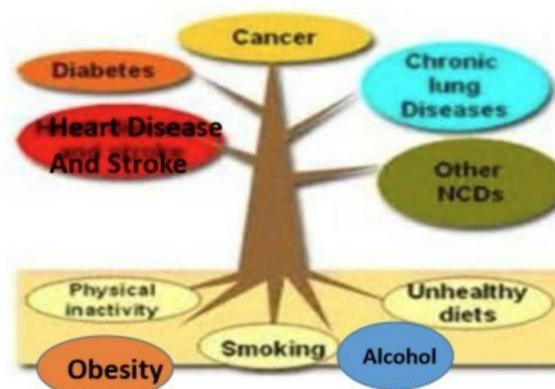
"If I had the same life expectancy as a Tongan man, I'd only have one year and three months left to live." Statistics show that life expectancy for men in Tonga is 65 years, mainly due to the rise in NCDs^[1].

A child born in the Pacific today is more likely to die before their grandparents and parents, largely due to the Obesogenic environments. It does not matter whether we are in Samoa, Tonga Vanuatu or Wallis and Futuna our story is one and the same. A healthy baby is born, fully immunized, is well cared for and loved. We invest in their education, and they get good qualification, good job and they may earn good money. The food environment however makes it very easy for us to eat ourselves to death. Young Pacific persons develop diabetes as early as age 30 and many develops complications by age 40 requiring amputation at 50 followed by kidney failure at 55 paving the way for “early preventable death” the plight of Pacifica today.

What a loss! Financial/economic investments as well as social and cultural loss that have direct impacts on families and the country as a whole. The presentation discusses NCD issues as related to how we look after our health as “a garden for our food security, health is for our everyday living.”

Health isn't everything, but without health, nothing else matters. Your health is the only resource we have to do life and to contribute to life. Doctors and nurses have known for many years now that health deteriorates when people don't eat healthy food. Everyone knows that as a fact, but knowledge is not enough to make us do what we know we should be doing.

In the Pacific, NCDs cause up to 40% of sickness and up to 70% of deaths. Over 20% of countries' budgets are allocated to NCD control in hospitals. Much more resources is needed for prevention and to address the many social cultural determinants outside the hospitals. Some 2500 years ago, Hippocrates said, “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food”.



The NCD issues are directly related to what we eat or do not eat. It is therefore important to look at the food we eat with the same respect we give to any medicine we take for any illness. From the food we eat our body has the fuel or energy to carry out daily activities. To be healthy, the energy gained from food we eat should be proportional to the energy required for daily activity.

This is the problem in the Pacific, we eat and gain way too much energy but spend too little time doing minimal physical activity. We drive to the supermarket, buy processed energy-rich food instead of working in our gardens. People in the Pacific don't walk to the hospital, because when they do decide to go, they are too sick to walk.

A 2009 study in Wallis and Futuna revealed high rates of factors causing NCDs. Not enough fruit and vegetables consumed, inadequate physical activity, high rate of high blood pressure and high rates of obesity. Specifically regarding obesity in Wallis and Futuna, the

risk factors are visible as early as age 18. In the 18-24 age group, 51% of men and 37 % of women are already obese. Many people are obese very early in life.

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