Cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in Pohnpei, one of four states in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), having accounted for 14.7% of all cancer deaths there for the period 1998-2002. Resources and access to appropriate screening services are severely limited, and consequently most cancers are detected at advanced stages.

Recently, the FSM endorsed National Standards of Practice for Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention, Early Detection, Diagnosis, Treatment and Palliative Care – a set of evidence-based and resource-appropriate practice standards applicable to all four states in FSM. Among the “core” practice standards for cervical cancer early detection is a screening method known as Visual Inspection with Ascetic Acid (VIA). VIA has been successfully tested and effectively used in low resource countries. As for breast cancer screening and detection, breast self-exams and clinical breast exams (CBE) are now core standards, as mammography is not available to women in the FSM.

The Pohnpei State Comprehensive Cancer Coalition and cancer stakeholders joined forces with the Pohnpei Women’s Advisory Council (P-WAC) to determine the most effective approaches to increase community awareness of breast and cervical cancer and related risk factors, and to encourage women to carry out breast self-exams and to seek screening using the newly adopted VIA method. From this collaboration, partnerships were formed to train women leaders from each of the 19 women’s groups that comprise the P-WAC.

With a small amount of federal money from the Pacific CEED Legacy Projects (a CDC-funded REACH US program), a lot of sheer determination, and the completion of a training-of-trainers, the P-WAC has begun to take the message of breast and cervical cancer prevention and screening directly to the women living in the municipalities. Since August 2009, 60 trainers from the women’s groups have mobilized to reach out to other women in their respective groups and in the villages to provide mini-training on breast and cervical cancers, encouraging women to participate in cancer screening (VIA and CBE), promoting breast self-exams, and encouraging vaccination of young girls against HPV, a major cause of cervical cancer. P-WAC officers and the 19 Women’s Groups that comprise the Council, Pohnpei Department of Health Services, Pohnpei State Cancer Coalition, Island Community Food of Pohnpei, FSM Resources and Development, and the Department of Youth and Social Affairs all partnered to support this project.

In June 2009, CIS Pacific’s Program Director Hali Robinett and Guam-based Partnership Program Coordinator Angelina Mummert provided technical assistance to the project’s planning team, comprised of P-WAC officers and health resource staff who served as faculty for the training of trainers. Using the National Cancer Institute’s Trainers Guide for Cancer Education, CIS introduced the project team to best practices in planning, conducting, and evaluating training programs, while addressing the cultural appropriateness of the various training techniques. In addition, CIS staff worked with the project team to develop a training plan for the training of trainers, held the last week of July. Ms. Mummert returned to Pohnpei in August to assist P-WAC trainees and leadership with the delivery of the village outreach and mini-trainings, the first of which kicked off in the village of Nett. Response from the women and girls in the villages has been tremendous, and results are expected in late October after the last of the village trainings are conducted. It is expected that the curriculum and materials developed through this project will be used to benefit other communities throughout FSM.

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