Palau Trainings Aim to Integrate Palliative Care into Comprehensive Cancer Care Services

by Jeannette Kojane

The Republic of Palau is one of ten United States Associated Pacific Islands (USAPI) with whom CIS Pacific Region, in partnership with the Pacific Center of Excellence in the Elimination of Disparities (Pacific CEED), has collaborated since 2008 to strengthen community programs and health infrastructure for cancer survivorship and palliative care. The Palau Ministry of Health (MOH) recognizes the importance of palliative care in home-based and in-hospital services. Palliative care is a relatively new field of study and practice, which includes clinical techniques to manage pain and other symptoms as well as spiritual & loving care by family and friends. Talking openly about palliative and end-of-life care can be an emotional experience. The planners concentrated on tailoring the training exercises to sensitively engage participants in sharing experiences and enabling MOH colleagues to craft concrete strategies and policies to make effective palliative care a reality in Palau.

A series of palliative care workshops, training sessions, and consultations were held in Palau July 13-20, 2009. The specific training objectives were to: provide an overview of palliative care emphasizing pain and symptom management and communication; increase knowledge and understanding, and motivate participants to practice new skills and behaviors learned. The training content was adapted from the “Caring the Pacific Way: Survivorship and Palliative Care” course piloted in April 2009 in Honolulu with the Cancer Council for the Pacific Islands and the USAPI Comprehensive Cancer Control Coordinators.

At the invitation of the Palau Ministry of Health, the training sessions were developed by the Palau Comprehensive Cancer Control Program (CCCP) with technical support from CIS Pacific Region, Pacific CEED (one of 18 CEEDs funded by CDC REACH US to reduce health disparities), and Kokua Mau, Hawaii’s Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Three day-long workshops were held, each targeting a different audience – health care professionals, general public, and policy makers. Hospital in-service trainings for doctors and nurses and a strategic planning session with MOH senior members also took place to update Palau’s Home Health Plan and policies.

Each day’s workshop offered a combination of lectures, individual reflection, and small group work. The Minister of Health, Dr. Stevenson Kuartei, Dr. Osarch, Yorah Demei, Director, Non-Communicable Diseases Branch, and other MOH Program managers and community leaders shared their programs and experiences, articulating their commitment to integrating palliative care into their health and community care systems. The efficient Palauan team expertly coordinated the in-country events and provided exceptional facilitation throughout the training program. More than 120 health professional, caregivers, members of the general public, and policy makers actively participated in the program.

The results of the training evaluations demonstrated that the workshop objectives were met, the topics were relevant, and the course structure was effective. The pre and post test results showed improvements in knowledge and perceived ability to incorporate palliative care into professional and personal roles. A high level of interest in additional training for a wide range of topics, including community based training for faith-based communities and family caregivers. A heightened awareness of the role of palliative care in a comprehensive cancer care system was also demonstrated.

To build on the momentum and interest generated during the workshop, action plans were developed by the MOH team for the top three priorities identified: 1) additional training; 2) improving the multi-disciplinary team; and 3) enacting pain policies to insure an adequate supply of pain medication. The Home Health Plan is being prepared by CCCP for submission to the legislature to ensure policy-level support and ongoing funding. At the end of the workshop, the Ministry of Health committed to hosting a follow-up session within six months. In the meantime, CIS, Pacific CEED, and Kokua Mau will soon finalize the palliative care curriculum based on the Palau trainings. This curriculum is being designed as a self-instructional training tool for adaptation in the USAPIs.

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