



**A nurse from Kaohsiung Medical University Hospital tests Solomon Islanders for diabetes in 2011 as part of Taiwan's efforts to tackle non-communicable diseases in the country.**



# Sharing Health Care Expertise

*For decades, Taiwan has been working to enhance medical care in the Solomon Islands by funding infrastructure projects, offering clinical services and organizing training programs.*

**BY OSCAR CHUNG**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KAOHSIUNG MEDICAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

**P**erched near the blue waters off Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, sits a testament to the Republic of China's (ROC) strong bilateral ties with its fellow island nation. The facility in question is the National Referral Hospital (NRH), the premier medical center for the more than half-a-million people scattered across the many hundreds of islands that make up the country.

In 1988, five years after the two nations exchanged diplomatic recognition, the ROC government funded the reconstruction of the aging National Central Hospital, replacing it with a new facility that became the NRH.

Designed and constructed by Taiwanese specialists, the NRH, which opened in December 1993, is a single-story, 302-bed medical complex situated on a 2.8-hectare seaside compound.

The ROC currently maintains formal diplomatic ties with 22 nations, and the official relationships allow Taiwan to share its expertise in a variety of fields—from agriculture and technology to epidemiology. “Aside from agricultural projects, Taiwan’s major contribution to the Solomon Islands has been to boost the health of its population,” says Victor Yu (于德勝), the ROC ambassador to the country.

Ambassador Yu points out that the NRH is the Solomon Islands’ largest medical facility as well as one of the two major infrastructure projects funded by Taiwan in the archipelago. The other is the parliamentary office building, completed in 2012.

Taiwan’s efforts to enhance health care in the country extend beyond infrastructure development. In 2007, the ROC

government established the Taiwan Health Center (THC) at the NRH, and Taiwanese personnel have since staffed this facility, boosting medical cooperation between the two nations as well as contributing their expertise to stamping out health problems that once plagued Taiwan and still menace the Solomon Islands. Since 2009, personnel coordination for the THC has been handled by Kaohsiung Medical University Hospital (KMUH), located in southern Taiwan’s most populous city. In particular, the hospital’s Tropical Medical Center in Taiwan, founded in 1967, has been a vital asset in fighting diseases and parasites in the Solomon Islands.

“The vast majority of tropical diseases have long since disappeared from Taiwan,” explains Martin Hsiao (蕭世槐), a senior specialist at KMUH, “but we have the expertise needed to tackle them.” He notes that techniques used to treat health problems in Taiwan that still confront the Tropical Medical Center, such as periodic recurrences of dengue fever, are easily transferable.

KMUH has worked closely with the NRH since they became sister hospitals in 2006, and the Taiwanese institution has improved the quality of care at the facility by donating advanced medical equipment. But it is the THC that has allowed Taiwanese specialists to better assess the needs of the people in the Solomon Islands. “The center mainly addresses public health issues, since the ROC government is highly focused on this area,” says Sophie Wang (王喻萱), a KMUH nurse who led the center for two years. “In this regard, Taiwan also has more opportunities to work with the World Health Organization [WHO] and international nongovernmental groups.”

The efficacy of the outreach programs relies on a close assessment of local needs and people-to-people contacts with residents. On an autumn day in 2015, Wang drove to a



**Two Republic of China draftees performing alternative service provide assistance at the Good Samaritan Hospital in the Solomon Islands during summer last year.**



**Solomon Islander medical personnel perform tests at the Dengue Fever Lab in the National Referral Hospital as their peers from Taiwan look on. The construction of the facility, which was completed in 2014, was funded by the ROC government.**

primary school on Guadalcanal Island for a talk with its principal over a parasite prevention project targeting students. Taiwan's health professionals have adopted a comprehensive strategy to combat parasites. This initiative involves screening schoolchildren, distributing antiparasitic drugs and encouraging kids to wear shoes when outside, a simple measure that can greatly reduce infection rates. Visits to schools, such as the one undertaken by Wang last fall, help boost awareness of and participation in the program.

Aside from the parasite-prevention project, public health efforts have focused on reducing cases of dengue fever, a mosquito-borne viral disease common in the tropics. The scope of the threat posed by dengue fever was first discovered during a three-year project initiated in 2010 by the THC, according to Hsiao. Researchers were testing grade school students

for parasitic infections. But the blood work revealed an alarming threat of another sort. Dengue fever antibodies were present in the blood of 60 percent of the children tested. This meant that they had been exposed to the dengue virus.

When the country experienced a major outbreak of the disease in February 2013, the dengue research helped stabilize the situation. The findings by Taiwanese researchers had already been delivered to the WHO. The global health body then funded training sessions, held in Singapore in March 2012, on dengue fever prevention, and the seminars

were invaluable to the three medical professionals from the Solomon Islands who attended.

The debilitating symptoms of dengue fever used to be commonly misdiagnosed in the nation, according to Hsiao, but Taiwan's findings and its experience of fighting the disease have since given the local medical community the upper hand. "They used to refer to dengue fever as the unknown fever or mistake it for malaria, but thanks to new equipment and training programs, local medical professionals now understand this illness," he says.

To further improve the Solomon Islands' capability to fight dengue fever, the ROC government began constructing a specialized facility at the NRH shortly after the outbreak in 2013. KMUH specialists designed the Dengue Fever Lab, which was completed in 2014, and invited NRH medical personnel to Taiwan for special training. The new lab, which is now fully operational, will be able to quickly track the spread of the disease if new outbreaks occur.

The epidemiological expertise is supplementing Taiwan's primary medical mission in the country—providing basic health care amid a severe shortage of doctors and nurses. Both practicing KMUH doctors and draftees performing alternative service rotate through the country to boost medical services in fields ranging from dentistry to pediatrics. Doctors usually stay, one or two at a time, at the THC for three-month stints, during which they offer advice to local peers and provide clinical services. KMUH medical personnel also regularly make special visits either to the NRH or to clinics around the country to supplement the rotating staff.

Marie Tavake, a nurse at the Good Samaritan Hospital in a rural area of Guadalcanal, worked closely with two Taiwanese

medical workers who made weekly visits to the Catholic hospital during the summer of 2015. "They're so nice, helpful and attentive when checking and taking care of people coming from villages in the neighborhood," she says. "I learned a lot from them too. I observed how they handle patients when helping out during their clinical services."

The THC augments the Taiwanese personnel by arranging for outside groups of specialists to provide services in the Solomon Islands, such as a medical team from the Johns Hopkins Hospital, a prestigious teaching hospital in the U.S., which visited in the fall of 2015. "These medical missions are of great significance, especially for people in rural areas far away from the NRH," says Tenneth Dalipanda, permanent secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

While visiting doctors help shore up services in the short run, training Solomon Islander doctors and nurses, as well as health care workers from other nations, lies at the heart of Taiwan's medical outreach. In 2005, the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (TaiwanICDF) launched the Healthcare Personnel Training Program in cooperation with its partner medical institutions. This initiative provides on-the-job training sessions in Taiwan lasting one to three months to foreign medical personnel, mostly from the ROC's diplomatic allies.

Last year, 32 trainees from 13 countries, including three from the Solomon Islands, came to Taiwan to receive instruction at KMUH and 10 other institutions. A separate TaiwanICDF program enables degree-track international students, also largely from the ROC's formal allies, to study in Taiwan on full scholarships provided by the organization. At present, 14 medical students



**Opened in December 1993, the NRH is a testament to the ROC's commitment to improving health care services in the Solomon Islands.**



**The Taiwan Health Center at the NRH arranges for foreign medical specialists to provide services in the Solomon Islands, such as a team from Johns Hopkins Hospital in the U.S., which visited in the fall of 2015.**

from the Solomon Islands are attending local universities under this scheme.

Mishella Moveni Tutua, a senior dentist at the NRH, received three months of training at KMHU in the summer of 2014 through the Healthcare Personnel Training Program. “I cherished every opportunity to watch and learn from the Taiwanese dentists,” she says. “Previously I’d heard about advanced techniques used in this department, but I didn’t truly know how they’re applied until I came to Taiwan.”

She says she now feels more confident evaluating the performance of young dentists at the NRH who recently graduated from medical schools, mostly in Fiji or Papua New Guinea. “Those young dentists are equipped with relatively new skills and knowledge,” says the Fiji-trained dentist who completed medical school a decade ago. “The training in Taiwan has enabled me to keep up with and even get a step ahead of them in professional training.”

As Taiwanese and Solomon Islander doctors reduce the incidence of more exotic illnesses, they are increasingly turning

toward more commonly occurring health problems. Dalipanda notes that non-communicable diseases (NCD), such as diabetes, gout and high blood pressure, are becoming the top threats to the health of his compatriots.

Consequently, Taiwan is tapping its own expertise in treating these illnesses. “The incidence rate of NCDs in the Solomon Islands is much higher than in Taiwan,” says Martin Hsiao of KMHU, “but Taiwan has accumulated rich experience of fighting NCDs, which is certainly worth passing on to doctors and nurses taking care of patients affected by these illnesses in the Solomon Islands.” As the medical mission has evolved, one factor has remained constant—Taiwan’s steadfast commitment to boosting the health of the people in the archipelago nation. ■