



Training the next generation of eye health workers

The key to long-term sustainable
eye health in the Pacific



The **Fred Hollows**
Foundation NZ

Due to the devastating impact of avoidable blindness, eye health is now considered a critical human rights and development issue. And a shortage of trained eye health workers presents one of the greatest challenges to improving eye health in the Pacific. As part of our commitment to ending avoidable blindness and vision impairment in the region, we support the training of local eye specialists, helping our Pacific neighbours build stronger, more sustainable, locally-led eye health workforces.

Challenges for the Pacific's eye health workforce

The countries of the Pacific region face numerous challenges to providing quality, equitable eye health care for their communities. These include accessibility issues due to deteriorating health infrastructure, lack of sufficient equipment and economic barriers.

Chief among these challenges is a shortage of qualified eye health workers, in particular in rural areas – for instance, in Papua New Guinea, only seven provinces out of 22 have an eye doctor.

Clinical training is essential for students, recent graduates and the broader workforce to improve their surgical practice and maintain their skills.

However, national hospitals do not always have the appropriate eye care clinical infrastructure, facilities and equipment, or enough experienced eye doctors and nurses to supervise clinical training.

Without more trained eye health workers to provide care, rates of avoidable blindness and vision impairment will continue to rise, in a region where these are already unacceptably high.

Several Pacific countries – including Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – are facing severe health workforce shortages, with fewer than 49 health workers to care for 10,000 people. This includes eye health professionals.



“Every patient that we see, every person’s vision that we restore is the end result of so many people coming together including the generous donors.”

Dr Lucilla Ah-Ching Sefo is the only permanent eye doctor in Samoa. She was inspired to pursue a career in eye care after witnessing the significant need for eye doctors in her country, where essential eye health services were provided only once or twice a year by visiting teams. Determined to make a difference, Dr Lucilla trained at the Pacific Eye Institute in Fiji and, in 2016, graduated as a fully qualified eye doctor, with a Master of Medicine in Ophthalmology.

Today, as Head of the Ophthalmology Department at the Ministry of Health, Dr Lucilla has helped make eye care services more accessible and sustainable for the people of Samoa. However, the challenges remain, with an ageing population and rising rates of diabetes increasing the demand for cataract and diabetes eye disease treatments.

Dr Lucilla remains dedicated to overcoming these obstacles, acknowledging that restoring sight is a collective effort.

“I am always grateful for all the effort of the team and how it came together to make this happen for this person. It is very satisfying to be able to help people and provide this service for the people of Samoa.”

Thanks to our incredible community of supporters, Dr Lucilla is able to continue working to improve eye health services while providing sight-restoring surgeries for the people of Samoa.

Why training local health workers is so important

As Fred Hollows said, “Teach the teachers first, then the teachers can teach others.”

We know that when we train one doctor or one nurse, they can then train many other local specialists. That’s why training and supporting local eye health workers is a crucial part of how we work with our Pacific partners.

These graduates may go on to become employees of the Department or Ministry of Health in their home country or end up teaching at a Pacific academic institution. This supports the efforts of our partner countries by helping them retain local talent, and to strengthen their local eye health care systems.

Not only does this provide long-term job security for graduates, it means they can return to working in the home country and community they love, and remain with their family and loved ones.

Training local health workers also embeds many long-term benefits for the broader community. More trained local staff means that eye health care can spread beyond the major cities into more remote regions. As more people have their eyesight restored, they can then reclaim their mobility. They can participate in society more fully, return to education, rejoin the workforce and provide for their families. Not only does this help reduce poverty, it can return a person’s confidence and sense of purpose.

Importantly, when we restore sight, we return the independence of families, the joy of seeing grandchildren smile, and the wonder of life seen in vivid colour.

Eye health qualifications supported by The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ

The Foundation supports training programmes at Fiji National University, Divine Word University in Papua New Guinea, and the University of Papua New Guinea. We offer academic scholarships for Pacific students studying towards postgraduate qualifications in specialist eye care at Fiji National University, Divine Word University, and the University of Papua New Guinea.

We also aim to eliminate the financial barriers that often prevent talented and passionate people from studying. We do this by providing financial assistance to students for basics like books and teaching equipment, travel and accommodation, along with input to support and improve the quality of the training programmes. We also provide the salaries for teaching staff. Students can then devote themselves more fully to their study without the burden of financial concerns.

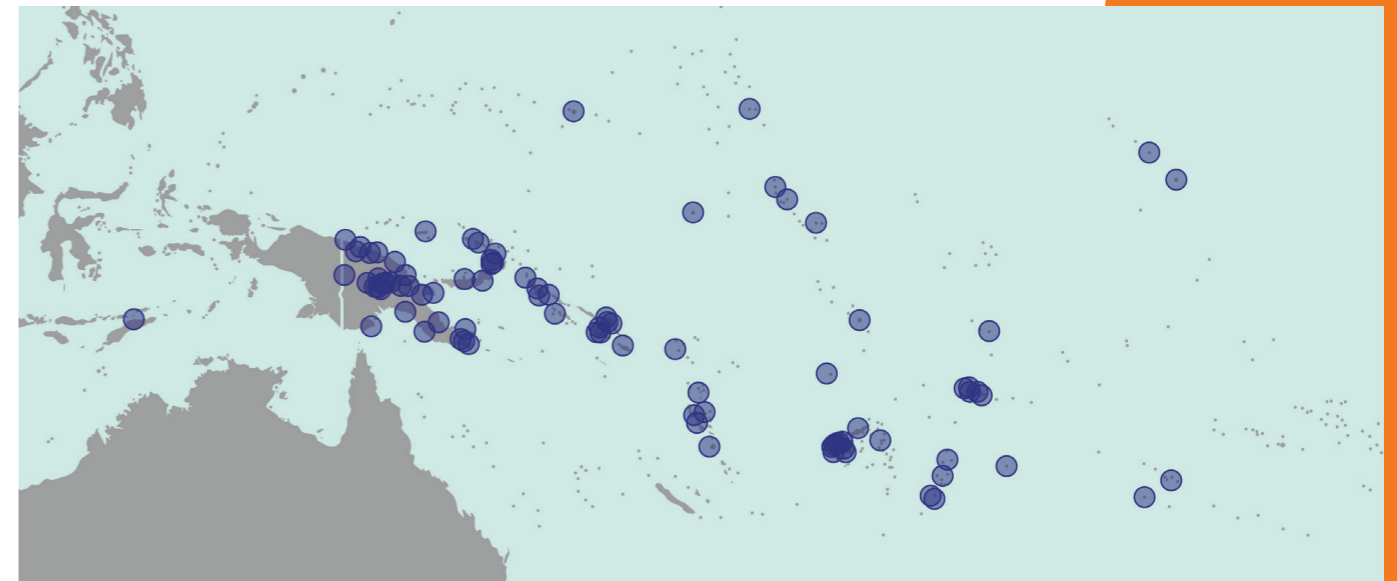
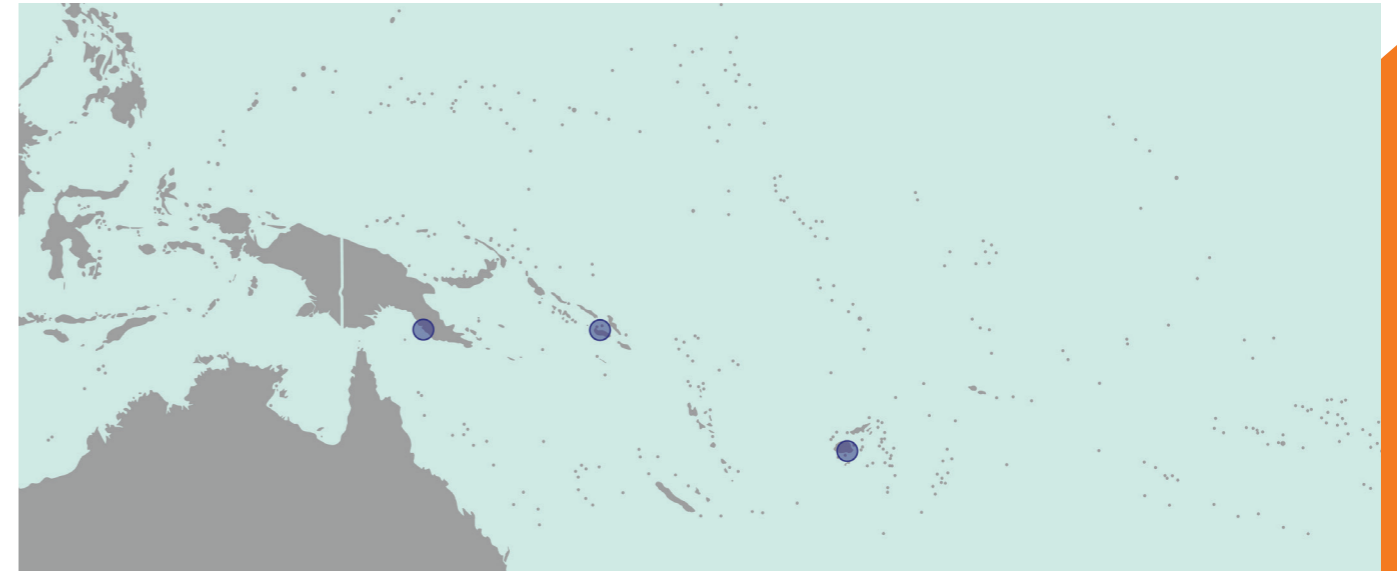
Courses we support include:

Advanced Diploma in Eye Care in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and **Postgraduate Diploma in Eye Care** in Fiji. This is a one-year full-time course is the final qualification to become an ophthalmic clinician (eye nurse).

Postgraduate Diploma in Ophthalmology. Graduates from this one-year course qualify as a trainee ophthalmologist. This is the prerequisite to MMed on the pathway to qualifying as an ophthalmologist (eye doctor).

Master of Medicine (in Ophthalmology) This is a three-year course to become a fully trained ophthalmologist. After the doctors graduate, they can return to their provinces to provide eye care services to the provincial communities.

Increase in eye health workers in the Pacific, 2000-2024



Helping train Pacific eye care professionals

The Foundation has worked with Pacific partners for more than 20 years, supporting nearly 400 Pacific health workers to complete their eye care training. In turn, these eye health workers have helped support over 1.2 million eye care consultations and 93,000 sight-restoring surgeries.

We partner with health authorities, hospitals and teaching universities to provide and support high-quality eye health training and clinical experience.

In the past, expatriate specialists were brought in to lead these programmes, but today they are increasingly led by local specialists who have themselves been through these programmes. This approach, building local expertise and confidence is essential to developing long-term, sustainable eye care services across the Pacific Region.

Valuable experience for students

Hands-on clinical experience is a key part of training for trainee eye doctors and nurses. We conduct national and regional outreaches to areas that don't have a resident eye care team to ensure that these communities are receiving the eye care they need. These provide an opportunity for trainee eye health workers to practise and improve their clinical skills, under the supervision of qualified, experienced Pacific eye doctors and nurses.

Ongoing professional development and support

Once students have graduated, we continue to support their professional development through workshops and tailored eye health mentoring, and ensure they have access to the essential supplies they need to provide high-quality care.

Training local eye health professionals in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea has unacceptably high rates of avoidable blindness and vision impairment. A national survey carried out in 2017 found an estimated 5.6 per cent of adults aged over 50 were blind – one of the highest rates in the world. Coupled with this, the country is experiencing a crippling shortage of eye health specialists.

The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ has worked in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea for more than two decades. Supporting the development of a local eye health workforce is one of our four key focus areas in the country. We facilitate this through our Eye Health System Strengthening Programme, for which training and support for local eye health workers is key.

Our partnerships with Divine Word University and the University of Papua New Guinea have so far supported the training and graduation of six eye doctors and 85 eye nurses. However, the current rate of graduation will not meet future demand.

The Centre for Eye Health in Port Moresby is a significant new facility that will increase our capacity to train new eye doctors and nurses in Papua New Guinea. The Centre will train approximately 10 eye nurses each year in the Advanced Diploma in Eye Care, doubling the country's annual number of eye nurse graduates. We also aim to have two eye doctors graduating annually. This cements our commitment to support Papua New Guinea in forging a strong, sustainable and locally-led eye health care system.



Our plans for next year

The Foundation will continue to work alongside Pacific governments, health ministries and universities to ensure that eye care services are accessible to those who need it most. Next year, we will support the training of:

- **Up to 24 nurses** who will be trained in eye care.
- **Six doctors** through the Postgraduate Diploma in Ophthalmology.
- **A total of 11 trainee eye doctors** through the Master of Medicine in Ophthalmology.

We need generous supporters like you to transform lives in the Pacific. Your investment in training eye doctors and nurses in the region will have a lasting impact, creating a sustainable health care system and ensuring future generations receive the care they deserve. You can close the gap in eye health services and give the gift of sight to those who need it most.





If you would like to know more, please contact Stephne Vaughan on svaughan@hollows.nz or call **(+64) 21 460 196**.



The Fred Hollows
Foundation NZ