



The Pacific Medical Centre is another extravagant waste of public funds

The Papua New Guinea government's proposed Pacific Medical Centre will be another extravagant waste of public funds and divert money and other resources from front-line medical care for rural people.

Plans for the K500 million super-hospital, to be build as a public/private partnership at Bautama outside Port Moresby, were first announced in February, although the National Executive Council had already committed K20 million to kick-start the project in November 2009.ⁱ

The government is promoting the project as *'the nations first world class fully serviced hospital and on of Asia-Pacific regions leading centres of excellence in providing first rate health care services and medical education'*ⁱⁱ but there are many solid reasons why the public should reject the proposed PMC.

1. It is the wrong priority

PNG is failing to deliver any progress on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and mothers and children are dying from preventable diseases because of a lack of basic immunization, medicines and access to health care.ⁱⁱⁱ

Currently in rural areas a women has a 1 in 25 chance of dying during pregnancy or childbirth and 1 in 13 children die before reaching the age of five. PNG also has the highest rates of tuberculosis in the Pacific region.^{iv} Addressing these problems should be the urgent priority for government, bureaucrats and health professionals rather than dreaming about a luxurious super-hospital that will not offer anything to the vast majority of Papua New Guineans.

As Pediatrician Dr Teariki-Tautea has pointed out^v, the priorities government should be addressing are:

- (i) Infant and maternal death rates which have escalated over the last 20 years;
- (ii) Aid-posts and health centres in the remote areas that are now either closed or lack the most basic of medications;
- (iii) The nonexistence of health patrols to remote areas;
- (iv) The lack of medications and basic laboratory, radiology and investigative services and facilities in the Provinces;
- (v) The disrepair of our hospitals and the overcrowding and lack of the most simple things like beds, linen, soap and food for patients;
- (vi) The lack of roads or airstrips or boats for ease of accessibility; and,
- (vii) The lack of public health awareness programs to the rural majority

2. It is an extravagance

The quoted cost of the Pacific Medical Centre, K500 million, is more than the government's annual total health sector spending but it will provide only a maximum of 300 beds.

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Where is the sense in spending more on 300 hospital beds than we spend each year on health care for 6.5 million people?

And what about the on-going running costs? The annual cost of running and maintaining the PMC will likely be more than the total amount the government currently spends on all 19 Provincial hospitals^{vi}. Again, where is the economic sense in this?

3. It will divert funds from other health care facilities

Pacific Medical Centre will inevitably take funding away from much-needed repairs and improvements to regional and local health facilities. Already the government has allocated K20 million of public money to the project which could have been spent elsewhere, and leaked NEC documents show how proposed spending of over K200 million for essential repairs and upgrading was cut from a funding proposal and replaced with K230 million for the Pacific Medical Centre.^{vii}

The deleted funding comprised K81 million for the replacement of outdated and obsolete medical equipment across all provincial hospitals including life support systems that are more than 10 years old; K17 million for the replacement of static plant like sterilizing units, oxygen plants, incinerators, sewerage systems, water supply systems and stand-by generators; and K124 million for staff housing for doctors, nurses and community health workers (professional staff who are having to live with relatives or in squatter settlements due to the lack of housing and affordable rents).

Meanwhile in September 2010 it was reported that maternity patients in Port Moresby General Hospital were sleeping in the corridors because the gynecology ward had been shut for 4 months awaiting urgent repairs while the Finance Department was refusing to release the repair monies.^{viii}

Even if the government were to be able to attract new funding into the health sector to pay for the PMC and did not have to divert existing funds, that is still money that would be better spent on improving existing health facilities and extending rural health care.

4. The hospital will be inaccessible to most Papua New Guineans

The hospital will not be accessible for ordinary Papua New Guineans as they will be unable to afford the fees or the travel costs to Port Moresby. The hospital will instead mainly service MPs and foreign workers coming into PNG to work on major resource projects like the Exxon-Mobil LNG program.

Current private hospital fees in Port Moresby start at K800 per night while the PNG government currently allocates just K140 per person per year in its health budget.^{ix}

5. The money is needed for staffing not more infrastructure

With most infrastructure in PNG already crumbling due to a lack of funding and maintenance the money for the Pacific Medical Centre could be better spent on increasing the number of medical staff (and in particular addressing the acute shortage of midwives^x that is contributing to high rates of maternal mortality) and the poor pay

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and conditions of nursing staff and doctors that is leading to a massive 'brain drain' overseas or away from medical practice completely.

6. The hospital will attract staff away from front-line services

The proposed hospital will in fact make service delivery in Provincial and rural areas worse because it will take qualified medical, nursing and support staff away from the already under funded and under staffed public health system.

7. There is a complete lack of transparency about the project

As the Port Moresby Chamber of Commerce and Industry has pointed out, there is a complete lack of transparency about the project, which was not developed in consultation with local clinicians and institutions^{xi}, and this raises questions about possible corruption.^{xii}

The government has refused to disclose the total cost of the project, estimated to be around K500 million and there has been no disclosure from the government about who will be providing the private investment in the project.^{xiii}

There has been no explanation of how the day-to-day running costs of the hospital will be met and how much will have to be taken from the health budget each year.

There are also widely disputed claims about how the public component will be funded.^{xiv}

While there is clear evidence the government has been seeking funding support for the hospital from China, the official government line is that funding will come from the Clinton Foundation in the United States and the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Media reports meanwhile suggest the Clinton Foundation has denied any involvement.

8. It is opposed by health professionals and other senior leaders

The super-hospital proposal is opposed by leading health practitioners like Dr Glen Mola, Dr Teariki-Tautea, academics like pediatrician Dr John Vince (Acting Dean of the School of Medicine and Health Science at the University of Papua New Guinea)^{xv}, former Health Minister, Peter Barter and the PNG Opposition parties, headed by former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta and former Treasurer Bart Philemon^{xvi}.

ⁱ 'World class hospital for PNG', PPAPD, 23 February 2010

ⁱⁱ Health Minister, Sasa Zibe, quoted in the PPAPD news article above

ⁱⁱⁱ 'No improvement in national indicators', The National, 12 May 2010

^{iv} 'PNG records highest rates of new TB cases, Radio Australia, 27 May 2010

^v 'The proposed PMC is not our priority now', Post Courier, 3 August 2010

^{vi} Dr Glen Mola 'Hospitals and health: The proposed PMC', Post Courier, 12 May 2010

^{vii} 'Hospital funds diverted', Post Courier, 1 Sept 2010

'Zibe slashes over K220 million to build his super clinic', pngxposed blog, 23 Aug 2010

^{viii} 'PMGH repairs on hold', Post Courier, 1 Sept 2010

^{ix} Dr Glen Mola 'Hospitals and health: The proposed PMC', Post Courier, 12 May 2010

^x 'Hospitals run short of midwives', The National, 1 Sept 2010

^{xi} 'PNG hospital project a mystery to local experts', Post Courier, 22 April 2010

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- ^{xii} 'Zibe told to come clean', Post Courier, 3 Sept 2010
- ^{xiii} 'Different partners will fund PMC', The National, 5 July 2010
- ^{xiv} 'PNG private hospital project fights resistance, Pacific Islands Report, 23 April 2010
- 'Donor agencies to fund hospital', Post Courier, 20 August 2010
- 'PM, Clinton talk super hospital', Post Courier, 25 August 2010
- ^{xv} Viewpoint, Post Courier, 10 March 2010
- ^{xvi} 'Philemon hists back at Zibe', Post Courier, 31 April 2010

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