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Reducing cancer health disparities: Perspective of the National Cancer Institute

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Abstract

The National Cancer Institute created the Special Population Network (SPN) to develop cancer awareness, research and training with partnerships from community and research organizations. This paper provides background information about the Pacific Islander Cancer Control Network, one of the SPNs, and about the seven research projects that are described in this Supplement.

In April 2000, the National Cancer Institute established the Special Population Network (SPN) with 18 awardees (1). The overarching goal of the SPN program was “to establish a robust and sustainable infrastructure to promote cancer awareness research in minority and medically underserved communities, and to launch from these more research and cancer control activities aimed at specific population groups.” (1)

These goals were to be addressed in 3 phases: Phase I involved infrastructure/capacity building aimed at establishing and maintaining a continuum of cancer awareness and education activities while organizing and building community infrastructure for research participation. Phase 2 emphasized establishing formal academic/clinical partnerships between the SPN awardees, research partners and community groups. These partnerships had three purposes: 1) enlist community partnerships, 2) enhance training opportunities for minority scientists, and 3) develop and implement pilot developmental projects. Phase 3 aimed at developing grant applications for research funding and with their partners (1).

The SPN program concluded in April 2005 after achieving a number of major milestones; however, it continues to have a significant impact on the communities served by the SPN projects. In addition, in May 2005, the NCI launched the Community Networks Program (CNP) to continue the momentum in reducing cancer disparities; making awards to 25 institutions to support community-based participatory education, training, and research (2).

The remainder of this manuscript provides brief background information regarding one the SPNs, the Pacific Islander Cancer Control Network (PICCN), with emphasis on the development of pilot research projects conducted by Pacific Islanders in their own

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communities. The other manuscripts in this Supplement describe the results of four PICCN pilot research projects and the progress of one of the Community Networks Program members that is continuing the efforts to reduce cancer health disparities among Pacific Islanders.

Like the other SPNs, the overall goal of PICCN was to provide an infrastructure to improve cancer control by increasing cancer awareness and enhancing cancer control research in a population with cancer health disparities – Pacific Islander in this case. Principal participants in the collaboration included the Center for Health Policy Research at the University of California, Irvine (UCI); the UCI Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center; and six Pacific Islander community-based advisory boards. The PICCN target populations, Chamorros, Tongans, and American Samoans, make up three of the four largest groups of Pacific Islanders in the US – only Native Hawaiians are more numerous (3).

A detailed account of the accomplishments of PICCN appears elsewhere (4). In brief, PICCN members conducted nearly 200 cancer educational programs in the 3 Pacific Islander groups. The programs included mass media campaigns using radio, television, and newspapers; presentations at churches, health fairs, and social events; and displays on billboards and posters. The Network also developed cancer awareness brochures in the Chamorro, Tongan, and Samoan languages regarding prostate, colorectal, lung, breast, and cervical cancer and tobacco control.

The major accomplishment regarding enhancement of research among Pacific Islanders was the development of pilot research projects (4). The PICCN Cancer Control Academy, a training program developed to introduce Pacific Islander students to cancer control research, was critical to this effort. The program addressed an important manpower need since relatively few Chamorros, Tongans, or American Samoans participate in cancer control research.

The Academy was conducted during three weeks each summer. The community advisory boards selected candidates for participation using specific criteria, including being a Pacific Islander, having at least a bachelor's degree, having a background in the sciences, and being committed to working in the field of cancer control research in the community. The coursework was geared toward the development of a pilot research project to be submitted to NCI for funding consideration. During the first week, the curriculum focused on information necessary for the background and significance section of a research proposal, including discussions about cancer among Pacific Islanders and literature searches. The second week focused on methodology, and the third week focused on grant writing skills. Through this curriculum, the students gain insight into field of cancer control research and how such research can benefit their communities.

The students, in consultation with their advisory boards, chose the topics for the pilot project proposals. One or more UCI faculty members served as student mentors. By the end of the training course, the students had prepared a draft pilot project proposal. They then worked with the faculty members to develop a final proposal for submission to NCI for funding consideration.

The Academy trained nine Pacific Islander students during the 3 years that it was conducted. NCI funded 6 of the pilot research projects submitted by these students. The maximum funding level was \$50,000 per grant including direct and indirect costs. Findings from four of these projects and a progress report from one of the Pacific Islander focused Community Networks Program members appear in this supplement.

The first two papers describe results from studies among Chamorros. Balajadia, et al report findings from a survey of cancer-related knowledge, attitudes, and preventive practices of Chamorros residing on Guam. Next, Cruz, et al discuss breast cancer related knowledge,

attitudes, and use of screening mammography services from a survey of Chamorro women in San Diego, California.

The next paper deals with specific issues regarding culturally related beliefs about cancer among Samoans. Puaina, et al discuss results of a focus group study of Samoan men designed to evaluate the influence of *fa'aSamoa*, the Samoan way of life, on cancer prevention services and to determine whether certain aspects of *fa'aSamoa* could be incorporated into cancer prevention programs to increase the use of screening services. In the fourth pilot research study, McMullin, et al described findings from an ethnographic study of cancer related knowledge, attitudes and preventive practices among Tongans in California and Utah. To our knowledge, this is the first study to report on these issues among Tongans.

In the final paper, Tanjasiri and Tran describe the *Weaving an Islander Network for Cancer Awareness, Research and Training* (WINCART) project, a member of NCI's Community Networks Program. This article reports progress to date including results from an analysis of community organizational capacities to participate in this collaboration.

Taken together, these pilot research projects provide important new information about the cancer control needs of Pacific Islanders and about approaches to address those needs. The studies represent formative research among seldom studied groups of Pacific Islanders. The studies' small sample sizes and sampling designs limit the generalizability of the findings; however, the results may provide insights for public health officials charged with improving educational programs and addressing barriers to cancer screening among these groups. Moreover, the findings should generate hypotheses from which future cancer control research among Pacific Islanders can be developed.

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