Summary of discussion and key outcomes

Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee meeting

2 April 2014 at Thursday Island, Australia

The Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC) met at Thursday Island, Australia, on Wednesday 2 April 2014. The HIC is a biannual forum to identify health issues arising in the Torres Strait Protected Zone and South Fly coast of Papua New Guinea, and members work collaboratively to address them.

For the first time, the HIC was co-chaired by the Australian and Papua New Guinea health departments. This is a welcome change to HIC’s chairing arrangements and brings HIC into line with other committees under the Torres Strait Treaty.

Members noted the minutes of the meeting of 9 October 2013 and progress on actions arising from previous meetings.

At this meeting, Members continued discussions on ways to improve cross border communications infrastructure to support reliable cross border health communications. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade reported on an assessment which provided options to increase internet connectivity in Daru, Western Province, both in the short and medium term, including the upgrade of the Daru communication tower and use of VSAT in the interim. Members also considered the value of replacing high frequency radios in Papua New Guinea Treaty Villages. Members noted that the international telephone link between Queensland Health facilities on Saibai Island and Daru General Hospital has been restored.

Dr Emma McBryde was invited to the meeting to provide a scenario analysis of the implementation and scale-up of programmatic management of tuberculosis in Papua New Guinea’s Western Province. Dr McBryde is an infectious diseases physician and infectious diseases modeller from the Burnett Institute, Victoria Infectious Diseases Services, and University of Melbourne. Members noted that Dr McBryde’s (et al) study highlighted the burden of tuberculosis in Western Province and the potential for a worsening in incidence and drug resistance without further investment in tuberculosis management.

Members noted amendments to the facilitated cross border movements initiative which clarify requirements including the need for valid passports and visas, and additional information on special emergency travel arrangements. Members will continue to consider ways to use the initiative for emergency cross border patient retrievals.

The HIC noted reports from the HIC Clinical Collaboration Group; the Torres Strait Communications Officer; Queensland Health on the treatment of Papua New Guinea nationals in Queensland Health facilities and communicable disease surveillance; the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on cross border movements; Daru General Hospital; health activities in the South Fly District of Western Province; and an update from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Australia’s ongoing support for tuberculosis management in Western Province.

The next HIC meeting will be held in the margins of the Torres Strait Joint Advisory Council meeting in late 2014 in Australia.