

1. Talofa, I wish to thank our colleague from Tonga for delivering the opening prayer and wish to acknowledge the presence of the Gods from the different religions we belong to.
2. As the Pacific Heads of Health meeting incoming Chair, it is indeed a privilege and humbling opportunity. I was appointed Permanent Secretary for Health in January 2020 and spent most of that year stranded in New Zealand. As you appreciate, I have a non health background, my professional background is fisheries. Thus, I will have no hesitation in turning to Heads of Health colleagues, SPC and WHO to support me in this role.
3. I wish to sincerely thank the outgoing Chair, Dr Merehau Mervin for her stellar service in steering the Pacific Heads of Health Meeting over the last 2 years, you have indeed left mighty shoes to fill. I am, however, reassured Merehau will continue to serve as Deputy Chair until the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting later this year, where I understand a host country for the 2023 meeting will be discussed.
4. Earlier in the year we learnt of the passing of our dear colleague's Dr Paison Dakulala from Papua New Guinea and Dr Livingston Taulung from the Federated States of Micronesia.
5. I understand both Paison and Livingston were the ultimate public health practitioners, softly spoken and humble human beings. Paison was a pioneering member of the predecessor of the Heads of Health forum known as the Pacific Senior Health Officials Network. Their untimely passing has no doubt been solely missed by their families, PNG and FSM health sectors and for those of us who knew them, their regional brothers, colleagues and mentors.
6. I am advised there are new members to the Heads of Health membership this year, from the, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Tokelau, Guam, Federated States of Micronesia, PNG, FSM, please accept my apologies if I have failed to recognise other new members, please join me in welcoming them to the Heads of Health family. Circumstances permitting, I look forward to meeting new and current Heads of Health in person.
7. We are now into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic and our thoughts and prayers are with the families across the Pacific who have

lost loved ones. Special mention to our frontline health care workers who are responsible, for testing, tracing and treating cases particularly in Fiji, Guam, French Polynesia and PNG. We commend Pacific countries who are COVID free and COVID contained.

8. I recognise the social and economic havoc the pandemic has brought upon our individual countries and encourage you all to continue the response plans your respective countries have embarked upon in collective efforts to contain the pandemic.
9. I am reassured with the rapid rollout of vaccinations across the Pacific, I congratulate the progress made in the United States Affiliated Pacific Island countries and the Francophone territories, the South Pacific countries are not too far behind.
10. I recognise the work of our Leaders through the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat in establishing the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID to ensuring a coordinated political and technical regional response. This has resulted in the development of Protocols related to Immigration, Repatriation, Clearances for Aircraft and Ships, Transporting of Medical and Humanitarian Assistance, Technical Personnel, and Customs and Biosecurity for countries to adapt and use.
11. I thank Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, United States, the European Union, World Bank, Asian Development Bank for the support either through regional or bilateral channels. Our individual national response efforts have been made that much easier with the generous and ongoing support we receive.
12. I further acknowledge the support Pacific countries received from the more than 20 organisations that make up the Joint Incident Management Team particularly in the early stages of the pandemic.
13. As we start our meeting, I will rely on the guidance of the Deputy Chair, seasoned Heads of Health and the secretariat to ensure we make it a successful one.

#### **14. Fakafetai lasi**