

Mobile health no substitute for improvements in the health system

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Mobile health services are not the hoped for silver bullet to improved disease prevention and control in the Pacific, according to researcher, Elaine Umali.

Although promising and with potential, Elaine doesn't believe they are a substitute for improvements in the [health system](#), especially in low-resourced settings.

The University of Auckland, Master of Public Health graduate has investigated the potential use of mobile phones as a [health](#) tool for [disease prevention](#) and control in the Pacific.

Her research was supported by a Fred Hollows Foundation NZ scholarship.

Elaine is now writing her formal paper, but warns mHealth (mobile [health services](#)) is not the hoped for silver bullet.

"If core health infrastructures are defective or lacking, investments in mHealth can't be used to replace actual investments to improve health services," she says.

Philippine born and educated, Elaine took up Global Health papers in the University's School of Population Health, as course requirements for postgraduate studies in public health, under co-ordinator Dr Judith McCool.

"I wanted to look at how mobile phones could be used in health, because they present a critical opportunity among low and middle income countries to improve and increase access to health care," she says.

"The rapid spread of mobile technology across the globe is making the medium very attractive in the development sector," says Elaine. "And in the Pacific, there's been a huge leap in the number of people with access to a [mobile phone](#), providing a way for Pacific Islanders to change how they communicate, govern and implement activities.

"Looking at how mobile phones can be used for health in the region is something timely and useful," she says.

During her research Elaine undertook an analysis of key stakeholder perspectives on establishing mobile phone services in the Pacific region to support the prevention of trachoma by conducting interviews with key NGO and government representatives and mHealth experts across the Pacific, Asia, Africa and the United States.

She hopes the outcomes can be a useful tool to start debate around the use of mHealth in the region and enhancing local health systems.

Before moving with her family to New Zealand five years ago, Elaine worked for a variety of internationally funded development programmes, spending more than five years in tuberculosis programmes in the Philippines as well as environmental governance projects, and hygiene and sanitation initiatives.

She retains a passion for development work and views this research as another step in advancing health care development in the Pacific.

Provided by University of Auckland

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