

**H.E. Sir Ratu Epeli Nailatikau**  
**Speaker of Parliament and UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador for the Pacific Region**  
**Handover of ARV donation by UNAIDS, Atlanta Medicare Ltd and DFAT-Fiji to**  
**Ministry of Health and Medical Services.**

**Monday 27 Sep 2021 at 3pm FPBS**

- The Minister for Health and Medical Services, Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqanibete;
- The UNAIDS Regional Director for Asia Pacific- Mr Eamonn Murphy
- The Deputy Australian High Commissioner to Fiji Mr Paul Wilson
- The CEO, Atlanta Medicare Co Ltd - Mr Suphadej Amnuaysakul
- The UNAIDS Country Director, Thailand- Ms Patchara Benjarattanaporn
- The UNAIDS Country Director, Fiji and the Pacific- Ms Renata Ram
- The Staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services;
- Members of the media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Afternoon. Ni Sa Bula Vinaka. Salam Alaykum. Namaste.

I am indeed very proud to be here this afternoon to witness this handover of ARV medication to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

This year has been like no other for Fiji and despite it all we can proudly stand together to affirm the continuation of our HIV response. The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening the progress that the world has made in health and development over the past 20 years, including the gains we have made against HIV.

As a life-long supporter of Ending AIDS and as the UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador for the Pacific Region, I am greatly comforted that the donation of these antiretroviral medications will be a most welcome lifeline to the 506 people living with HIV in Fiji, who without this treatment would certainly have had a high chance

of succumbing to AIDS-related deaths. This includes 38 children who are currently on this treatment.

I would like to thank our friends from UNAIDS based here in Fiji and Thailand for their leadership in mobilizing the support needed to ensure that the HIV drugs arrived in Fiji without any disruptions in treatment. This is especially so during this time when logistics have been an issue for procurement.

Thank you and vinaka vakalevu to Atlanta Medicare from Thailand for this very kind donation of first-line HIV drugs and to our Vuvale partner- DFAT for supporting the pediatric HIV medications.

According to the Global AIDS Monitoring Report, Fiji is shown as being included in the top 5 countries of rising new HIV infections in the Asia Pacific region, among the 15–24-year-old age group, and with an increasing rate of over 50% since 2010. This puts Fiji ahead of all other Pacific Island countries and is thus a cause for great concern.

Our Fiji statistics shows that during the past 3 years we have seen an increase in HIV cases among Men who have sex with men and Transgender persons. In 2020, Fiji had a total of 147 new cases and 13 of these cases were pediatric cases. These were mostly opportunistic cases, meaning that there wasn't active outreach done for testing. This could indicate that there are many unknown cases out there – a trend that is common throughout the world.

I have no doubt that you will agree with me that these numbers are not acceptable.

As, I have often said we must never take our eyes off the ball. Unfortunately, we appear to have been somewhat complacent in Fiji when it comes to HIV.

I fully understand and totally support the importance of the COVID-19 response and the prominence it has now been given and the calling for full and concerted public action to combat it. However, I also believe that existing diseases, such as the pandemic HIV/AIDS, also needs our continued attention as it has been around

for so many years - and is still without a cure - and as such has lifelong impacts on people who are affected and with their families.

The COVID-19 pandemic must not be an excuse to divert investment from HIV. There is a risk that the hard-earned gains of the AIDS response will be sacrificed to the fight against COVID-19, but the right to health means that no one disease should be fought at the expense of the other.

Like all epidemics, it is widening the inequalities and faults in our systems that already existed.

However, the HIV response in Fiji was not at its best even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the collision of COVID-19 and HIV has set it back further.

COVID-19 is a wake-up call for the world to strengthen health systems. Had health systems and social safety nets been stronger the world over - we would have all been better positioned to slow the virus and withstand its impacts.

I believe that the lessons learned from the HIV Response and all the resources that have been injected into our health system in Fiji since our hard-hit second wave of COVID-19, has given us the boost we need to rejuvenate our HIV program.

Its not too late for us to reduce the number of new infections of HIV in Fiji and prevent AIDS-related deaths.

There are many innovations that we in Fiji must introduce. This includes PrEP services for HIV prevention, stronger HIV combination programs targeting Young People and Key Populations such as the LGBTIQ community and Sex workers. We also need to learn from the best practices from the Asian and African regions on community-based service for expanding our reach. And together we can End AIDS by 2030.

I look forward to the reconvening of the HIV Board Meeting this year where we can discuss this new way of working on our HIV programs with the UNAIDS Pacific Office, our Bilateral partners, civil society, and the hardworking Fiji HIV Team.

Thank You. Vinaka Vakalevu. Sukran. Bahoot Dyna Vaad.