

## Exploring Key Elements of Successful Distance Learning Programs: A Case Study in Palau

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**Abstract :** Background: The Pacific faces multiple healthcare crises, including high rates of noncommunicable diseases, infectious disease outbreaks, and susceptibility to natural disasters. These issues are expected to worsen in the coming decades, increasing the burden on an already understaffed healthcare system. Telehealth is not new to the Pacific, but improvements in technology and accessibility have increased its utility and have already proven to reduce costs and increase access to care in remote areas. Telehealth includes distance learning; a form of education that can help alleviate many healthcare issues by providing continuing education to healthcare professionals and upskilling staff, while decreasing costs. This study examined distance learning programs at the Ministry of Health in the Pacific nation of Palau and identified key elements to their successful distance learning programs. Methods: Staff at the Belau National Hospital in Koror, Palau as well as private practitioners were interviewed to assess distance learning programs utilized. This included physicians, IT personnel, public health members, and department managers of allied health. In total, 36 people were interviewed. Standardized questions and surveys were conducted in person throughout the month of July 2019. Results: Two examples of successful distance learning programs were identified. Looking at the factors that made these programs successful, as well as consulting with staff who undertook other distance learning programs, four factors for success were determined: having a cohort, having a facilitator, dedicated study time off from work, and motivation. Discussion: In countries as geographically isolated as the Pacific, with poor access to specialists and resources, telehealth has the potential to radically change how healthcare is delivered. Palau shares similar resources and issues as other countries in the Pacific and the lessons learned from their successful programs can be adapted to help other Pacific nations develop their own distance learning programs.

**Keywords :** distance learning, Pacific, Palau, telehealth

**Conference Title :** ICHDC 2021 : International Conference on Healthcare in Developing Countries

**Conference Location :** Singapore, Singapore

**Conference Dates :** January 11-12, 2021