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The Asia-Pacific Military Medical Conferences

WITHIN THE LAST DECADE, members of the Australian Defence Health Service have served on operations in Namibia, Somalia, Western Sahara, Rwanda, Cambodia, Kurdistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. Servicemen and women from all three Services have been involved, working as part of multinational teams. Similar commitments have been made by the defence health services of several Pacific nations. The Singapore Armed Forces Medical Corps served in Guatemala in 1997; New Zealand and Fiji sent military medical personnel to Bougainville in 1998; and the US is involved in several Pacific deployments, such as in Palau, and in rabies eradication programs in the Philippines.

The deployment of the Defence Health Service overseas has been a major exercise of Australia's strategic policy. This proactive and altruistic use of the Defence Health Service has been an expensive commitment, but the response in national and international opinion has been most favourable. Developing nations, in particular, see this commitment as appropriate for a nation with one of the highest standards of health in the world.

The Asia-Pacific Military Medicine Conferences provide an important annual forum for liaison between the Australian Defence Health Service and those of other nations in our region. The Conferences have been co-hosted since 1990 by the United States Army, Pacific Command (USARPAC) and another rotat-

ing host nation (so far including Thailand, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand). Each Conference allows military healthcare providers throughout Asia and the Pacific to exchange information about military medical issues common to all uniformed medical forces, such as preventive medicine, operational health deployments, combat surgery, malaria research, training injuries and medical ethics within the profession of arms.

The ninth Conference was held on 7-12 March 1999 in Bangkok. The tenth will be held in Singapore in May 2000.

Forty-three nations and over half the world's population are encompassed in the phrase "the Asia-Pacific region". Australia's principal strategic interests are in this region, where it is inevitable that there will be a continuing need to respond to natural disasters and military crises. Pre-deployment training for both uniformed and civilian groups and the interpersonal collegiate linkages that conferences help to create will make for improved effectiveness in multinational missions of the future.

A significant influence for the maintenance of a muscular peace is the enhancement of military-to-military relations. In peacetime, these can be promoted by international joint exercises, military personnel exchanges and conferences.

Major General John Pearn
Surgeon General

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