

Pioneering new approaches to healthcare

Minister of Health and Sports Richard Visser is spearheading a drive to improve the health of the Aruban people, combating obesity and drug addiction and improving medical facilities

Aruba's Minister of Health and Sports Richard Visser achieved two firsts when he addressed the 66th session of the United Nations in September 2011. He was the first official representative of the island to speak at a UN High-Level Meeting, and his presentation of the Aruba Declaration on Obesity with Special Attention to Childhood Obesity was the first time non-communicable diseases had ever been discussed at a meeting at this level. Indeed, it was only the second time health issues have ever been discussed at a UN High Level Meeting—the AIDS epidemic being the first.

The declaration was signed by 22 nations of the Americas when Aruba hosted the first-ever Pan American Conference on Obesity with Special Attention to Childhood Obesity in June 2011. It calls for nations to commit to the fight against childhood obesity, for governments, institutions and communities to share strategies, and for greater investment in promotion of a healthy lifestyle.

Obesity is on the rise in the Pan-American region, the consequence of a growing trend of poor eating habits and little physical exercise, and if unchecked is set to result in an increase in chronic diseases in the future.

The burden of non-communicable diseases is already having an adverse effect on health costs in Aruba itself, where the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased alarmingly among children.

"Aruba has a higher rate of obesity than the U.S.," says Dr. Visser, who has carried out extensive research on the subject. "In adults it is 77% and 36% in children."

Little used to be done towards prevention, but under Dr. Visser's leadership, the Ministry is now taking an integrated approach towards educating citizens on the importance of a healthy lifestyle, nutrition, and physical fitness activities.

Dr. Visser has devoted much of his professional life to childhood health and nutrition. Born



in Aruba, he studied in the U.S. and is a renowned expert in the field of childhood obesity. His motivation is personal as well professional; when he was eight years old, his father died from obesity-related causes. "My father was overweight all his life," he says. "If he or his parents had made better health choices when he was a child, my dad might be alive today."

Recently, the Minister visited the White House, where he met with the obesity consulting team of First Lady Michelle Obama, who has made combating childhood obesity one of

her main projects. The U.S. team has expressed interest in implementing some of the ideas outlined in the Aruba 2009-2018 health plan, which Dr. Visser helped draw up.

Dr. Visser's fresh approach to obesity reflects the paradigm shift he has brought to the Ministry of Health and Sports since his appointment in 2009, which is characterized by modernization, use of technology, innovation, and education.

It is evident in the ministry's approach to another significant health problem in Aruba—drug addiction.

"We have taken addiction out of the justice system and put it under healthcare, which then means that you treat it as a disease and not as a crime," says Dr. Visser.

"The government takes responsibility for the main direction of where we want to go—coordination, administration, and technology—but we have basically given all the power, the money and the resources to the non-governmental organizations. We have handed power to people who can really use it."

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DR. RICHARD VISSER, Minister of Public Health and Sport, speaking on behalf of the Kingdom of the Netherlands during a UN high Level Meeting

disturbing to the community can be compelled to undergo treatment.

"We have worked together with the ministries, the police and the judges here to design this program. The judge makes a decision and we can then pick them up and put them under mandatory treatment for one to two years. We have a capacity of about 150 for people who voluntarily go for treatment and a capacity of around 62 for aggressive patients."

Tracking software supplied by DeHoop in Holland has been provided around the island, so that whenever an addict is admitted medical staff will know what treatment is required. As with obesity, there is an emphasis on prevention as much as cure, and trainers are taking a prevention program for addiction, alcohol, and drugs to Aruba's schools.

Significant benefits to Aruba's health system are expected to spring from a strategic partnership formed between the IMSAN medical center in San Nicolas and the American hospital chain Baptist Health International, including the establishment of an oncology facility for the treatment of cancer and an urgent care center.

Meanwhile a major expansion and modernization is planned for Aruba's only fully-fledged hospital, the Dr. Horacio Oduber Hospital built in the 1970s.

This is expected to be completed in 2015. A new six-storey tower will enlarge the size of the hospital by 60%, and will include 90 new rooms for patients and a modern ER.

Dr. Visser promises state-of-the-art technology and a design linked to efficiency and functionality.

"We are looking to have an exemplary hospital. We are set up to be totally compatible with e-care, m-medicine etc," he says.

"Aruba has the great fortune to have a high standard of care, and with this new project infrastructure catches up. If you build the right environment, in itself your quality of care will increase."

governmental organizations (NGOs) sit on a national drug agency that advises the minister. "Each NGO has direction—they do not just do whatever they want. They are financed by us, and they have to adhere to what we as a group decide. Our social system has also changed so that the government is paying for most of the treatment right now, and that is a huge switch and change in terms of how we deal with addiction."

A 24-hour hotline has been set up to provide guidance for addicts and their families. Addicts who are aggressive or

PACO to stop child obesity in the continent

Health summit will raise awareness and prompt action to combat obesity "epidemic"

A third Pan-American Conference on Obesity, with Special Attention to Childhood Obesity, is to be held in Aruba this June.

PACO III, 2013 will follow the highly successful first two conferences held on the island in 2011 and 2012, and, as before, has the backing of the WHO and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). At the first annual event, representatives from 22 nations of the Americas signed a declaration calling for action on obesity, and childhood obesity in particular. Among those representatives were W. Coutinho (President of IASO, Brazil), H. Blanck (Branch Chief, U.S. Obesity Prevention and Control Branch, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention) and S. Pfohl (Executive Director, President's Council on Fitness, Sport & Nutrition, White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, U.S.).

Dr. Richard Visser says what is needed is a change in the environment around vulnerable individuals and groups, especially in the Americas where he describes the prevalence of obesity as "an epidemic." In Aruba this has led to a focus on education initiatives and promotion of a healthier lifestyle.

The three-day conference aims to propose a specific platform for the prevention of obesity nationally and internationally to facilitate implementation of interventional actions and research.



Dr. Richard Visser with Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, Director of PAHO, and Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the WHO

Co-branding better healthcare on the island

New radiotherapy service will mean cancer patients will no longer have to travel abroad for treatment



Every year, Aruba has to send around 200 cancer patients abroad for radiotherapy, as it lacks the facilities to provide the care they need. However this is set to change thanks to a five-year agreement between the IMSAN medical center in San Nicolas and the American hospital chain Baptist Health International (BHI) of South Florida.

The deal, which will see the creation of Aruba's first oncology center, will mean that patients will be able to receive treatment closer to home. IMSAN is to be converted into a hospital that will provide advanced medical treatment not only for the people of Aruba but for patients from other Caribbean islands as well. The conversion is expected to take about a year.

"It is [BHI's] first move into this area," says Dr. Visser. "We are going to do radiotherapy, chemotherapy, nuclear medicine, and continue developing it to a complete cancer hospital."

BHI will also assist in developing a state-of-the-art center for the treatment of diabetes, which is prevalent throughout the Caribbean, and in converting the emergency department into an urgent care center to reduce the pressure on the island's emergency care facilities.

Dr. Visser sees big potential for e-medicine and believes Aruba could become a center for medical tourism.

"We are going to be digitalized, meaning that a doctor here can work on a patient while a doctor in Miami does as well. All the vitals and the scans will be digitalized. We are going to create a whole new sense of how we can optimize care in countries that do not have super-specialists."

Elderly tourists to Aruba can rest assured that if something happens, they will be able to connect with the U.S.

Technology will revolutionize patient care

Plans to introduce e-medicine and m-health are among innovations in the island's healthcare

Involving patients in their own healthcare through the Internet is an important part of the innovative way Aruba's Ministry of Health and Sports is seeking to improve healthcare on the island.

Dr. Visser is a keen supporter of e-medicine and wants to see more and more patients getting medical advice and care by consulting their doctors online through e-mail, secure messaging, and face-to-face online doctor visits. The ministry is also looking at introducing m-health, which enables patients to use mobile communication technology to keep an eye on their health.

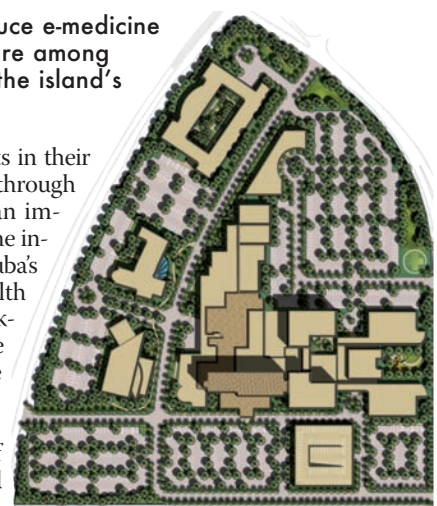
"Devices that we have now can monitor you wherever you are," says Dr. Visser. "We want to develop that. This is the future of medicine."

There are plans to introduce the integrated web-based healthcare platform, Drimpy, which combines a patient's health record and journal with a network and the ability to communicate with doctors and health professionals.

"Eventually every citizen here will use it. You will be able to access your public health files, your hospital, insurance and specialists and doctors who will answer your questions directly."

There are innovations in the real world too, including plans for a health bus—effectively a traveling clinic with a scanner to measure BMI (Body Mass Index), and a laboratory. "The bus will do screening on obesity and non-transmittable chronic diseases," says Dr. Visser. "At the same time, the information coming out of the bus will be used for research."

In other interesting developments, Soper Strategies of the Netherlands has been working on a project to free the island of the infectious tropical disease dengue, while the hotel industry is collaborating with the Institute for Healthy and Active Living (IBISA) on a guide to healthy lifestyle activities for tourists.



Future renovation and expansion of the Dr. Horacio Oduber Hospital