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**SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF SEA MERCY HEALTH CARE CLINIC AND “MD ROBYN”**

Suva Yacht Club Thurs. 3rd July, 2014

SUVA 1000 Hours

**Honourable Ministers;**

**Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Representatives of International Agencies;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here this morning to launch two new initiatives that will dramatically boost our ability to provide health care to thousands of Fijians living in remote maritime communities.

The first is the commissioning of a new vessel – the *MD Robyn* – to service the outlying islands in the Lomaloma medical subdivision in Lau.

The second is a highly imaginative project – called Sea Mercy - to provide roving health care from two larger vessels travelling between all the islands of the Lau Group.

Both are partnerships between the Ministry of Health and external groups. In the case of the Robyn, the local district hospital board in Lomaloma contributed $30,000 to its total cost of $83,000. So this is a partnership between the local community in Vanuabalavu and the Government, working hand in hand to deliver better health outcomes for ordinary people in the Eastern Division.

And in the case of the Sea Mercy project, the Ministry has joined forces with an international aid organisation – the Sea Mercy Foundation – to cast the health care net even wider.

The two catamarans you can see further out there today will travel throughout the Lau Group with a team of medical professionals conducting outreach clinics.

From their respective bases in Lomaloma, Vanuabalavu and Tubou, Lakeba, these catamarans provide us with floating platforms to deliver a range of health care services to people living in some of the most isolated places in Fiji.

I’m very excited about this project and its potential to deliver better health outcomes for ordinary people. A team of international volunteers has been assembled to work with personnel from the Ministry of Health on board the Sea Mercy vessels. And when they anchor at a particular island, they will bring with them an unprecedented capacity to deal with a range of medical and dental complaints.

Whether it is oral care, eye care, or treating the common ailments and illnesses of any maritime community, the people of Lau will soon have a new friend to turn to in times of need. And I’m sure that it will take no time at all for the Sea Mercy crews to be greeted as treasured visitors at islands and villages all over Lau.

On behalf of the people of Lau and every Fijian, I want to express my warmest thanks to the Sea Mercy Foundation and its founders – Richard and Stephanie Hackett - for this magnificent contribution to the care of our people. Just as I thank the people of Vanuablavu for their contribution – through the Lomaloma hospital board – to the cost of building the Robyn.

Today marks the beginning of a new era in our ability to provide community health outreach clinics in our outer islands. And that era has only been made possible by a wonderful collaborative effort between Government and the community, in the case of Lomaloma, and an international aid agency, in the case of the Sea Mercy. For both these commitments to the health and wellbeing of our people, we are extremely grateful.

This is also an opportune time to reflect on the contribution made to health care in Fiji over the years by a succession of international partners. Some of these projects have been large – like the current partnership between Australian doctors and our Ministry of Health to eradicate scabies, the *milamila,* that for too long has been an uncomfortable feature of life in Fiji.

Others have been smaller but no less dramatic, whether it’s visiting teams of cardiac surgeons mending our people’s hearts or cosmetic surgeons correcting a harelip and putting a smile on a child’s face.

Some of the top medical professionals in their fields have given their time free of charge over the years to assist ordinary Fijians – some from our traditional friends like Australia, New Zealand and the US, others from much further afield like Israel.

I cannot stress enough how important these partnerships have been and will continue to be for the wellbeing of our people, or how grateful we are that you have been willing to help.

So I want to pay a special tribute to the first rotation of overseas volunteers for the Sea Mercy mission who will join their vessels in Taveuni this weekend. Welcome to Fiji and may you be blessed with fair winds and smooth seas.

The ability to deliver proper standards of health care – to meet the needs of ordinary people – is a continuing challenge even in the most advanced countries. Nations like the United States, Britain and Australia are facing unprecedented pressure on their own health care systems as more people live longer and demand better care.

So it is only natural that we face an even bigger challenge in a developing country like Fiji, where the gap between the demand for health services and our ability to supply them is often stretched to the limit.

You will hear a lot of promises made by would-be politicians about health in the lead-up to the General Election in September. They are already saying that more needs to be spent on health, just as they say more needs to be spent on just about everything else without ever saying where the money will come from.

I want to be frank with the Fijian people about what we can and cannot do in the health care area. We cannot meet every demand overnight. That is because for many years there has been very little investment in our health system. In other words there has been no long term vision or goal. We are starting from the basics in many areas in the public health system.

Notwithstanding that, in the past six years, my Government has created 696 new jobs for doctors in the Ministry of Health and 1,510 new positions for nurses. We’ve also increased the number of medical professionals being trained in Fiji and overseas. And all over the country, we have set up new health care clinics, with increased operational hours and with an emphasis on delivering services to all Fijians whether in the urban or peri-urban areas or in remote rural and maritime areas. We have invested millions of dollars in new medical equipment.

Cabinet has also just approved another 553 positions for ancillary workers in the system – cleaners, hospital orderlies. In fact, no other government has ever made the investment that we have made and are still making to deliver a better standard of health care in Fiji.

The one thing I can promise you is this: While we may not as yet have everything we want in the way of staff and equipment, my Government is doing everything we possibly can to use what we have wisely, efficiently and to maximum effect.

We are always seeking imaginative ways to overcome the problems we face – to think outside the box – to enable us to meet an acceptable standard of health care for a country of our size and means. And that means the strongest possible commitment from our health workers, who we highly value for their dedication and skills.

It is about doing more with less – my underlying philosophy when it comes to government generally. While at the same time, doing everything possible to grow our economy – to increase the size of the national cake – so that we can spend more on health and everything else.

When it comes to vote, remember this: Promises are cheap. Actions speak louder than words. And my government is growing our economy by a projected 3.8 per cent this year, more than Australia and New Zealand. Fiji is on the move. And that means more investment, more job creation, more people paying tax, more Government revenue and more ability to deliver the basic services that have been the hallmark of my own Government’s time in office. More money for health.

And in the meantime, we will also forge partnerships that deliver better health care for ordinary Fijians.

We’d naturally like to see more local community involvement in helping us to provide health care services, like the partnership that has produced the MD Robyn, and more international involvement through projects like Sea Mercy.

With one vessel operating in Tonga and now these two in Fiji, the Sea Mercy Foundation is living up to its pledge to fill the gap between the needs of people in isolated maritime communities and the ability of governments to meet those needs.

It is all about upholding the principle of service to others – serving the needs of ordinary Fijians – which makes Sea Mercy an ideal partner for a Government that shares the same values.

And so, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have great pleasure in welcoming Sea Mercy to Fiji and launching its project in Lau. And I have equally great pleasure in launching the MD Robyn.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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