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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF HEALTH FOR ALL MEDICAL SYMPOSIUM**

**FNU Pasifika Auditorium Sun. 27th July. 2014**

**Extension Street, SUVA 1000 Hours**

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**Your Excellency, the Indian High Commissioner to Fiji,**

**The Honourable Minister for Health,**

**The Vice Chancellor of the Fiji National University and the Dean of the College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences;**

**The Senior General Manager – Corporate Development –**

**of the Apollo Hospitals Group,**

**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 the Fiji Health for All Medical Symposium – a joint project of the FNU, our Ministry of Health and Apollo Hospitals of India.

As its name suggests, this gathering brings together a number of experts from Fiji and India to discuss ways in which we can improve the health and wellbeing of all our people.

For the first time, Fiji is gaining the opportunity to engage with a major health provider in India – the Apollo Hospital Group.

Apollo currently operates eight major hospitals in India and another two in Bangladesh and Mauritius. And it has two facilities called Reach Hospitals that are providing health care in rural areas of India beyond the major population centres.

All told, the Apollo Group touches the lives of an estimated one billion people. So it is a major player in the industry with a level of skill and experience that provide us with a great opportunity here in Fiji.

Through this initiative, we are gaining access to some of the best medical minds in India - in Cardiac Sciences, Neurosciences, Orthopaedics, Oncology, Renal Transplant and Critical Care.

So this is a partnership that holds out the promise to delivery better health care outcomes for ordinary Fijians across a range of disciplines.

I want to express my gratitude on behalf of the Government to our Indian friends for their willingness to provide their expertise and engage with our own health professionals. Because it’s impossible to overstate the importance of partnerships like this for Fiji.

The ability to deliver proper standards of health care – to meet the needs of ordinary people – is a continuing challenge in even 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.

Of course in an ideal world, more needs to be spent on health. But I want to be frank with the Fijian people about what we can and cannot do in the health care area.

My Government over the past six years has been playing a catchup game in terms of the availability of equipment, of local specialists, nurses, professional health care givers and more importantly, in the attitude of some medical staff to their professional duties. We need a better level of sensibility shown towards patients in our hospitals.

We are determined to achieve a steady improvement in service delivery. And 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 an emphasis on delivering services to Fijians in remote rural and maritime areas.

Recently, Cabinet 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.

So the one thing I can promise you is this: While we may not 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 developing more partnership and collaboration with organisations such as Apollo to help us leap frog over the current hurdles, particularly in the delivery of tertiary health care.

We also require the strongest possible commitment to better standards 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.

One of Fiji’s biggest challenges – and it is a challenge for every single citizen - is the burden on our health system of patients with non-communicable diseases, NCDs. Such things as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes are now a bigger problem in countries like Fiji than communicable diseases. As indeed, they are in many countries around the world. So we need a much bigger effort in Fiji to tackle NCDs and, of course, this requires a fundamental change in the behaviour of our people.

We have to keep being honest with ordinary Fijians and say: If you are in one of the risk categories – and especially if you are obese - you urgently need to change your lifestyle. You need to eat less of everything and eat more nutritious food. And you need to exercise more, give up smoking and reduce your consumption of alcohol and kava. Because this is the only way to keep yourself healthy and to fundamentally reduce the burden of NCDs on our health system.

I realise that a plea for moderation may not be part of a politician’s usual pitch during an election campaign. But I am making it anyway because it’s for the good of every Fijian and the good of our country. Put simply, a better Fiji is a healthier Fiji and that must always be our objective.

With these words, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you well as you review the current state of health care in Fiji and chart a way forward.

Together, the FNU, my Government and the Apollo Group have formed a unique partnership and I now have the pleasure to declare this Symposium officially open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.