

Demystifying Rongoā Māori: Traditional Māori Healing

Key concepts:

- Rongoā Māori is the traditional healing system of Māori, incorporating the use of plant based remedies
- Tohunga are the practitioners of Rongoā Māori
- Establishing a good relationship with Māori patients will enable them to talk to you about the Rongoā they use
- Be aware of interactions between Rongoā and conventional treatment or medications

History of Rongoā Māori

Rongoā Māori is the traditional healing system of Māori. It focuses on the oral transmission of knowledge, diversity of practice and the spiritual dimension of health. Rongoā Māori encompasses herbal remedies, physical therapies and spiritual healing.

Tohunga is the discipline of traditional healing and its practitioners. In early Māori history Tohunga were seen as the earthly medium of the controlling spirits and influenced all aspects of life. Illness was viewed as a symptom of disharmony with nature. If a person was sick, the Tohunga would first determine what imbalance had occurred, before the illness could then be treated both spiritually and physically.

When European settlers came to New Zealand, they brought with them new diseases, modifying the environment and changing the disease ecology of the country. This caused significant mortality among Māori from influenza, measles, whooping cough and dysentery. The Māori population continued to decline into the early 1900s until the situation was reversed partly due to health reforms including building latrines, destroying unsanitary dwellings and establishing Māori health nurses.

The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 grew out of concern of the practice of “rogue” Tohunga who lacked the training and integrity of traditional Tohunga. Rongoā Māori was seen as unsafe and an impediment to Māori progress by the medical fraternity. A conventional western medical system was desired for New Zealand. At this time, the activity of “quack” doctors was also suppressed with the Quackery Prevention Act 1908.

The Tohunga Suppression Act was passed with support from the four Māori members of Parliament, but only Tohunga whose activities were seen as harmful, were suppressed. The legislation was never really enforced with very few Tohunga prosecuted. However the main consequence of the Act was that it pushed the practice of Rongoā Māori underground. Identities of Tohunga were kept secret and matters of Rongoā were never discussed outside of Māori communities.

Rongoā Māori today

Despite the Suppression Act, training of Tohunga continued over the years and knowledge was passed on and developed. In 1962, as a result of a review of legislation that differentiated between Māori and Europeans, the Tohunga Suppression Act was repealed. With the resurgence of Māori culture in the past few decades Rongoā Māori has once again become prominent.

Māori view health in a holistic way, incorporating spiritual, psychological, physical and family aspects. It is perceived that conventional health services are focused on treating a person’s physical health but may not always address other aspects. Some Māori may feel that their needs are better met by engaging with their traditional healers. There may also be geographical, financial or cultural barriers to accessing mainstream healthcare for some people.

The World Health Organisation advocates the inclusion of traditional healers in national health systems. There is a call for Rongoā Māori to be formalised within the public health system in New Zealand and to exist in synergy with

conventional medical systems. The following steps have been made to this effect:

- In 1993 the National Organisation of Māori Traditional Practitioners (Ngā Ringa Whakahaere O te Iwi Māori) was established.
- In 1995 regional health authorities were able to purchase aspects of Rongoā Māori. The Ministry of Health has continued to fund services.
- In 1999 the Ministry of Health published a set of standards for traditional Māori healing.
- In 2006 the Ministry of Health released a Rongoā development plan outlining how Māori traditional healing practices will be supported within the health and disability sector. The aims of this plan are to improve the quality of Rongoā services, create leadership roles within Rongoā, increase the capacity and capability of services and develop research and evaluation activities.
- In 2007 Lake Taupo PHO signed a contract for services with the National Organisation of Traditional Healers, setting a benchmark for bridging the divide between Māori and mainstream services. The two organisations now work together to promote the benefits of Rongoā Māori.

The practice of Rongoā Māori

Rongoā is an important aspect of health care to many Māori people despite their concurrent use of western medicine. It represents the passing on of culture and history. Traditional treatment may be sought for a variety of reasons including illness that is atypical or not responding to conventional treatment, mental illness and chronic “lifestyle” conditions such as type II diabetes.

Tohunga do not have a specific training programme or institution but are recognised experts in their field by their communities. Many learn their craft through the passing on of knowledge from elders or through apprenticeships with practising Tohunga. Knowledge and practice borrowed from western medicine may be incorporated into treatment.

Tohunga may work alone or within a clinic (Whare Oranga) and generally do not actively advertise for patients. There is considerable variation in practice and treatment protocols and no standard consensus on diagnosis or prescription. Treatment is individualised to tribes, areas, local plant material and specific needs. Healers are thought to be more prevalent in rural areas and in the North Island.

Treatment includes plant remedies from native flora (Rongoā rākau), massage (mirimiri) and prayer (karakia). Illness is treated by addressing aspects of health including spiritual, psychological, emotional, cultural, social, environmental, family and physical health.

As part of the Ministry of Health standards for traditional healing, Tohunga must ensure that:

- Patients are aware of any follow-up treatment or consultation required
- Patients are referred to other services where appropriate, especially for emergency or acute needs
- Co-operation with other health professionals according to the wishes or needs of the patient takes place

Whare Oranga, like general practices, are required to keep records for patients they treat. These records must contain details of treatment objectives and outcomes.

Some Māori patients may be unwilling to admit to their doctor that they are using traditional healing methods. However GPs should feel comfortable asking their patients about Rongoā Māori. As for any patient, it is important to be aware of any alternative remedies that a patient is taking, to assess any possible conflict with conventional medicine or treatment.

Plant remedies – Rongoā rākau

Plant remedies (Rongoā rākau) form an integral part of Rongoā Māori. Numerous native plants are used to treat a variety of conditions including colds, flu, gastrointestinal problems, genitourinary problems, aches and pains. Plants must be carefully prepared as some species are toxic if not used correctly. Some of the more common plants used in Rongoā Māori are listed in Table 1.

The use of plant remedies does not require regulatory approval as long as they do not contain a scheduled medicine. However, as some pharmaceuticals are derived from plants, it is possible that Rongoā may contain active ingredients. As long as these pharmaceuticals are not purposely added to a remedy no restrictions apply to the use of such plants. Note that some plants, for example St Johns wort, can interact with conventional medicines.

- Appropriate tikanga (customs and rites) must be observed during the collection, preparation and storage of Rongoā.
- Plant material must be correctly identified, gathered from non-polluted areas and prepared safely and hygienically.
- Plants are usually crushed or dried and mixed with water or ethyl alcohol.
- Plant remedies should only be prescribed and dispensed by Tohunga to individual patients. Tohunga will advise on appropriate use.
- Plant remedies should not be labelled with therapeutic claims. Labels should contain the ingredient(s), instructions for use, date of preparation, expiry date and who the remedy is prescribed for.

Table 1: Examples of plants used in Rongoā Māori

Māori name	Common name	Part used	Condition
Kawakawa	Māori Pepper Tree	Leaves; chewed	Toothache, swollen face, kidney and bowel stimulation
		Leaves; boiled	Boils, diuretic, “blood purification”, paipai (skin disease resembling ringworm), gonorrhoea, syphilis, arthritis, bruises
		Leaves/branches; smoke, steam	Gonorrhoea, syphilis, paipai, chest congestion
		Root; chewed	Dysentery
		Leaves; whole	Wounds, bandaging
Koromiko	Hebe	Leaves; poultice	Ulcers, venereal disease, bleeding after childbirth
		Leaves; boiled	Inhalation, throat gargle
		Leaves; chewed	Diarrhoea, dysentery, promotes hunger
		Leaves; infusion	Astringent
		Shoots; chewed	Stomach pain
Mamaku	Black Tree Fern	Bark; poultice	Boils, pus, sores, chaffing, swollen feet, sore eyes, sun burn
		Wood; gum	Stem bleeding, diarrhoea
		Shoots; boiled	Expel placenta
		Shoots; poultice	Breast pain
Karamu	Coprosma	Leaves; compress	Aches and pains
		Leaves; decoction	Cuts, sores
		Leaves/twigs; boiled	Broken limbs
		Sap	Scabies
		Shoots; boiled	Kidney/urinary problems
		Bark; infusion	Aches, pains, colds, stomach pain, nausea
Kumarahou	Gumdigger’s soap	Leaves; infusion	Coughs, colds, asthma, bronchitis, tuberculosis, wounds, skin disorders, blood purification
Manuka, Kanuka	Red tea tree, White tea tree	Leaves; infusion	Kidney and urinary problems, fever, cough, gonorrhoea.
		Bark; decoction	Diarrhoea, dysentery, pain, healing, inflamed breasts, sedative
		Shoots; chewed	Diarrhoea, dysentery
		Seeds; chewed	Stomach problems
		Seeds; poultice	Wounds
		Seeds; boiled	Anti-inflammatory
		Oil	Antiseptic
		Gum	Burns, wounds, coughing

Table 1: Examples of plants used in Rongoā Māori (continued from previous page)

Māori name	Common name	Part used	Condition
Mahoe	Whiteywood	Bark; inner	Burns
		Leaves; infusion	Rheumatic pain
		Leaves; boiled	Scabies
Makomako	Wineberry	Bark; infusion	Rheumatic pain
		Leaves; boiled	Eye irritation, boils, burns
Toot, Tutu, Tupakihi	Tutu*	Shoots/leaves; poultice	Wounds, bruises, sprains, swollen joints
Harakeke, Korari	Flax	Leaves/root; poultice	Wounds, abscess, swelling, chilblains
		Root; juice	Ringworm, skin irritations, flatulence, toothache
		Root; crushed	Constipation
		Root; boiled	Diarrhoea, dysentery, blood purification
		Gum	Ringworm, rheumatic pain, wounds, burns, sunburn, toothache
		Leaves; whole	Bandage, stitching wounds, splints
		Leaves; red juice	Gonorrhoea

* All parts poisonous except for swollen petals. Contains Tutin toxin, which has caused death.

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