

An Introduction to Te Ao Māori – the Māori World

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This bulletin outlines some commonly held perspectives of Māori people and culture. Culture is defined as a way of life of a particular group of people at a particular point in time. However, it is important to note from the outset there is no one Māori perspective and suggestions that members of cultural or ethnic groups behave in characteristic ways risks stereotypic generalisations of individuals.

For many general practitioners Māori Health information was not present during medical education. It is for this reason a beginning introduction of Māori concepts is the focus of this bulletin. It is not intended to undermine Māori or the knowledge and experience of GPs who have positive relationships with individual Māori patients. To gain some insights to Te Ao Māori (the Māori World) it is important to understand basic notions that guide Māori society.

Tapu

In pre-contact times, the health of a Māori community was promoted and protected through a complex system of tapu, noa and rehua. These concepts form the basis of law and order, safe and unsafe. People, places, events and objects could be Tapu. Tapu is sometimes translated as sacred, holy or forbidden. Things or places that are tapu should not be interfered with. Examples are the dead, or a person's head. It is important to note that two ends of the alimentary canal are always kept very much apart.

Noa

Noa is the opposite of tapu, examples are food and alcohol. Noa dictated everyday practices as the complementary opposite of tapu. Tapu and noa things must be kept separate. For that reason, it is culturally offensive to sit on a food table, put a hat on a food table, pass food over a person's head, sit on their pillow, or walk over their outstretched legs.

Tapu and noa both have their roles, and things that have been made tapu must be made noa before they can be used in an ordinary way. People are made tapu by entering a meeting house, and the image over the door is often female to make them noa again.

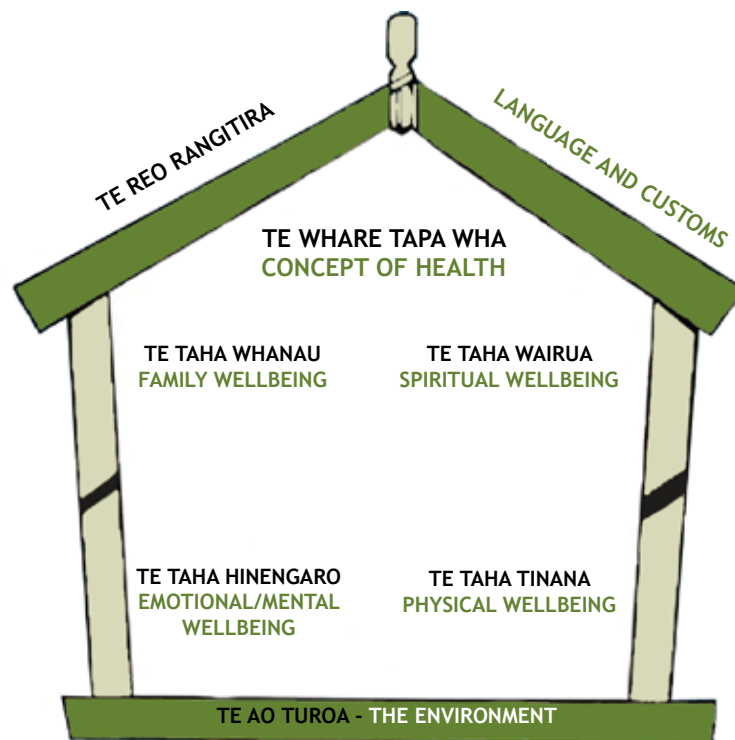
A Māori Health Model

Te Whare Tapa Wha can be applied to any health issue affecting Māori from physical to psychological wellbeing. It is one model commonly used in health that describes how Maori health is underpinned by four dimensions that represent basic beliefs of life.

The wharenui (meeting house) is the symbol used to illustrate the four dimensions of a Māori worldview of well-being. Each corner of the house has to be strong and balanced. If one of the dimensions is not present then this leads to an imbalance in well-being.

This is an influential model for describing concepts of health and wellbeing from a Māori perspective. The robustness of this model and its wide use in health policy indicate a successful “bridge” between two world views as non-Māori begin to deliver services to meet Māori need. It provides a practical guide on the domains of experience using Te Whare Tapa Wha during consultation with patients (Durie, 1999).

Western medical philosophy tends to focus on the physical signs and symptoms of an individual. In a traditional Māori approach to health, wairua, (spiritual), the role of the family and hinengaro (the mind) are as important as physical appearance of illness (Durie, 1998).



Te Taha Hinengaro

Psychological health with a focus on emotions; this covers the capacity to think and feel, and is understood that the mind and body are inseparable. Communication through emotions is important and more meaningful than the exchange of words and is valued just as much, for example, if Māori show what they feel, instead of talking about their feelings, this is regarded as healthy.

A western perspective of health translates into symptom clusters, syndromes or isolated behaviour patterns. A Māori approach, for example depression or anxiety may not be seen as isolated areas of dysfunction but as indicators that the balances between emotions, social relationships, spirituality and the body have become distorted.

Te Taha Wairua

Spiritual health; faith is determined and the person’s relation to unseen and unspoken energies. Wairua is recognised as the most essential requirement for health and wellbeing. Unfortunately this aspect of Hauora Māori (Māori Health) is least recognised

in western medicine. It is believed that without a spiritual awareness an individual can be considered to be lacking in wellbeing and more prone to ill health. Wairua may also explore relationships with the environment, between people, or with heritage. When confronted with a problem Māori do not seek to analyse its separate components or parts, but ask in what larger context it resides, incorporating ancestors or future generations to discussions, thus incorporating the past, present and future.

Te Taha Tinana

Physical health; growth and development as it relates to the body. The focus is on bodily care and physical well-being. When a person is under a great deal of emotional stress or is unwell, the tinana suffers. Soreness in different parts of your body is one way your tinana is communicating what is going on consciously and or unconsciously. Our physical 'being' supports our essence and shelters us from the external environment. For Māori the physical dimension is just one aspect of health and well-being and cannot be separated from the aspect of mind, spirit and family.

Te Taha Whānau

When discussing healthcare and Māori it is important to understand the concept of whānau as the most basic unit of Māori society. Whānau are clusters of families and individuals descended from a fairly recent ancestor. Whānau may include up to three or four generations and have established in diverse ways in today's society. The importance of whānau will vary from one individual to the next. Whānau centred care underpins all service developments in Māori Health service provision.

Māori Medicine - Rongoā Māori

Rongoā is the name given to healing substances produced from native plants. These are used by Māori to deal with a range of sicknesses and complaints, from fevers and recovery from fevers, infected wounds, boils and burns, and stomach upsets, to insect stings and insomnia.

There are two key issues that need to be further explored, Māori use of prescribed medications and Rongoā Māori that may interact with conventional medicines. Evidence (PHARMAC, 2004) suggests the uptake of prescribed medications among Māori is low. Therefore it is important the clinician emphasises the importance of the medication and explore the individual's understanding and beliefs in relation to this.

If the prescribed medication is of higher importance, and an alternative therapy 'clashes' with the medication prescribed, the whānau need to understand 'why'.

Māori Healers

Traditional Māori healing has re-emerged as an important strand in health care for Māori. Māori healers today use plant-based medicines for healing as well as karakia (prayer) and mirimiri (massage). They acknowledge the spiritual dimension, and model their healing processes on holistic models. Understanding their patients, their family circumstances, issues related to their wairua or spirituality and their sense of self, gives today's Māori healer an appreciation of all the factors necessary for rehabilitation, long term wellbeing or comforting a dying patient.

Tohunga were the professional experts in various fields including healing. They understood physiological principles and appreciated the healing properties of plants. They focused on both body and mind in the process of healing. The perpetuation of knowledge, skill and expertise in various areas of traditional Māori healing has continued throughout the twentieth century and tohunga have varying degrees of experience with mirimiri (massage), karakia (incantation or prayer), wai tapu (water therapy) and heat applications.

Karakia

Karakia (prayer) is a 'normal' part of tikanga Māori. Karakia may briefly precede assessment or healing or it may be an integral and ongoing part of the healing process, associated with other rituals like wai tapu. Karakia is usually performed by kaumatua if not a priest or tohunga.

For Further Information

We recommend the following website as providing some good background material:

He Hinatore ki te Ao Māori - A Glimpse into the Māori World: Māori Perspectives on Justice Part 1 - Traditional Māori Concepts.

http://www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2001/maori_perspectives/part_1_te_ao.html

References

Durie, M. (1998). *te Mana te Kawanatanga - The Politics of Maori Self Determination*. Auckland: oxford University Press.

Durie, M. (1999). *Whaiora*. Auckland:Oxford University Press.

PHARMAC Maori Use of Medicines - Focus group Hui Report, September 2004.