

# ***Reframing Public health Nutrition and Physical Activity***

## **Whenu Tangata – Human Strands**

### Positive Medicine

Tihei mauri ora	Behold the breath of life
Tuia ki runga	Fasten above
Tuia ki raro	Bind below
Tuia ki roto	Unite from within
Tuia ki waho	Unify the outer
Tuia te here tangata	Unify the strand of humanity
Ka rongo te po, ka rongo te ao	Listen constantly night and day
E ngā mana,	I acknowledge your mana
E nga reo	I acknowledge your voice
E ngā karanga maha	I acknowledge your diversity
Tēnā tātou katoa.	I greet you all

This well-known tauparapara or introductory salutation often heard in formal speeches on marae throughout Aotearoa provides an indigenous platform for us to consider in the development of a sectorwide vision. It encompasses many important aspects of health and wellbeing. “*Tihei mauri ora*” refers to the breath of life; *mauri* is a life force that all living things share. *Tuia* means to bind, signifying the importance of connections between people. *E ngā mana* indicates that everyone has their own mana, their own talent, their own contribution. *E ngā reo* represents that everyone has their own language, their own voice and their own belief. Therefore within this tauparapara, the tapu, the mana and the whakapapa of the listener is acknowledged. It is from these key notions of Māori humanism that we may begin the discussion of reframing public health nutrition and physical activity with our vision.

The discussion begins here following two meetings held in the last month between Agencies for Nutrition Action (ANA), Te Hotu Manawa Māori (THMM) and the chairpersons of the priority focus groups for Vision 2022 (subsequently became Vision 2024). The first meeting held in August at AUT campus was initiated by ANA in order to discuss where and how do we go from here? THMM were involved in this meeting to provide advice on a process for realising Māori aspirations and analysis to be included in the development. A key outcome from this first meeting was recognition from the group that Māori values act as the anchor for the vision and strategy, supported by other evidence based models that adopt a similar values based approach such as the positive health model which was tabled at the meeting by Grant Schofield. The group agreed that a strong and clearly articulated values based approach be adopted for this vision, and that the approach weave Māori humanism (Tapu, Mana) with a Western positive psychology health model (PERMA). It was also acknowledged that:

1. Our current health system is mostly a sickness system centred on secondary care and facilities to cater for these needs. It is not going to be sustainable to keep growing these services to deal with an increasing burden of mainly non-communicable disease prevention and treatment. Despite a lot of public and private sector investment no country has made significant progress in reducing the burden of non-communicable disease or reducing the risk profiles of their populations.
2. Within the context of this system public health often adopts a deficit type approach where returning people to a “risk free” state (e.g., reducing obesity and reducing 5-year CVD risk) are outcomes. Recent moves in the field of mental health lead by Martin Seligman into positive psychology, and recently his calls for a similar overhaul and reframing of public health into a model which is underpinned by a goal of human flourishing are a possible way to frame work in public health especially healthy eating and physical activity behaviours. When the underlying principles of this model are considered we see an emphasis first on changing the language from deficit to engagement. We see an underlying principle to be first “engaging people in lives worth valuing”. The underlying principles of this positive health model are to start with helping engage people in life (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaningfulness, achievement (PERMA)). This is underpinned by healthy eating and physical activity as fundamental to human physical, psychological and social flourishing. This “positive health” model converges on existing indigenous models of health, especially that in Maori health. Both approaches are essentially values based.
3. Public health, especially the social determinants of health is highly political. The current framing of social determinants is rightly contextualised in the social ecological framework which emphasises the importance of policy and environmental determinants of health. This language although correct is often viewed as a political ideology rather than evidence based preventive medicine. This means that the consistency and sustainability of public health policy is prone to rapid change with government change. This is an issue in many countries including NZ. In the United States, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently released a report to address this issue. They used an evidence-based approach to understand how to get messages about the social determinants of health across in a politically neutral, but convincing way. Michael Marmot, a leader in the social determinants of health, recently commented at his Auckland symposium that “we need to help people live lives they have reason to value”. This language re-orientates public health talk and converges nicely on both positive health frameworks and Maori health frameworks. A reason for this is that this is also underpinned to an appeal to values.
4. Public health has to a large extent failed to engage key decision makers (outside of the public health sector) or the public (people, whanau, communities, society) in a meaningful way. Health has become synonymous with the absence of disease. Rather than seeing people, whanau and communities as the solution we have become increasingly inward focused viewing them as the problem that needs to be fixed. The issues surrounding nutrition and physical activity are complex – therefore solutions that embrace this complexity rather than more simple fixes are needed.

Given the above, the group saw synergies and a way forward in public health which has the ultimate goal of increasing the health of all New Zealanders by reorienting the way we engage with the public and policy makers around healthy eating and physical activity. This would depoliticise public health, (especially discussion around social determinants), allow reinvestment into programs which may be more effective to all, engage our highest risk groups most especially Māori and Pacific who are likely to embrace a values

based approach to public health over a deficit model. A nice way to frame this coming together of positive health and Māori health models is to frame it in a way that is uniquely New Zealand. For this reason we have chosen to move forward using a Māori focus with adaptation to the existing evidence-based positive health model.

A second meeting was then arranged with the chairpersons at THMM offices to share the Māori knowledge and values based approaches that THMM had been designing with consultant Mason Ngawhika from Te Hiringa Ltd. The intention of this meeting was to increase the group leaders' knowledge and awareness of Māori health values and discuss how they may be applied to the different priority areas of focus. It was at this meeting that Grant Schofield also presented detail behind the positive health model and highlight the links this has with Māori health values. The content that follows is an outline of the information that was shared with respect to the application of Māori values in the development of this sector vision and strategy.

### **Tapu, mana and whakapapa**

*'Māori humanism offers the following fundamental principles of life and wellbeing. Each person has value because of their intrinsic tapu and mana. Tapu is existence, or being with potentiality for mana – the power to act in the world.'* – Manuka Henare (Te Tiriti, te tangata, te whānau)

Traditionally, Māori were not governed by rules, rather influenced by principles and values. The values and principles served to guide us, direct us and were often used as a state of wellbeing to aspire to. These same values still serve to influence our morals, our behaviours and our decisions today. The challenge is how we reinterpret such principles and values and apply them in a meaningful and practical way that is relevant to us in our contemporary world. The korero that follows is an explanation of how these principles and values were applied traditionally and how they may be considered in our context of contemporary public health.

**Tapu** is a pervasive power sourced from ngā atua (supreme beings, creators) and inhabits all things from the living to the inanimate. People, places and things have varying degrees of tapu and is an extremely important spiritual attribute. Everyone is born with tapu though some more than others. Tapu is closely associated with mana and neither can be separated from each other. In traditional times the institution of tapu regulated behaviour and attitudes at all levels. Tapu served as Māori law, the original public health system, the director of social protocols, the determiner of social standings and the regulator of resource management. Tapu as an institution was everywhere and pervaded everything. Anything that could potentially harm a person was considered tapu; more correctly, may compromise a person's tapu and therefore appropriate precautions needed to be made.

If tapu reflects the state of a whole person, then life can be viewed as protecting personal tapu. In doing so, one is protecting their physical environment, their social, physiological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. The protection of tapu is linked to the protection of self and the need for all the strands that constitute health and wellbeing to be in a state of balance.

**Mana** is an unseen spiritual power that people sense and therefore those with great mana have the ability to influence others. Mana is the tapu of the Atua and although all people are born with mana, some have more than others. In traditional times, the nobility possessed

greater mana than common people because through genealogy they had closer affiliations to the atua and other high ranking ancestors. This mana is referred to as *Mana Atua*. Such people came from noble prominent families and were generally positioned in leadership roles. Personal and group relationships are guided by the high values placed on mana. Although mana is inherited, it can also be gained or lost through ones actions. Being born into a noble family was no guarantee to leadership roles. *Mana Tangata*, is mana bestowed by the people due to ones actions and achievements. All people have mana, all people have the ability to enhance their mana. Those with the greatest mana have the capacity to nurture relationships and harness the potential and the energies of others.

There are very few people today that have maintained their prominent ancestry and therefore lineage is not as relevant as it once was. Many of us may benefit from the deeds and achievements of parents, grandparents and other predecessors. In this respect life is not a level playing field where educated and wealthy families have greater opportunities to succeed. Despite this, the lore of *Mana Tangata* maintains that everyone has the opportunity to elevate their place in this world. Mana is the dynamic creative force that motivates individuals to do better, to strive and achieve. Through a process of nurture, knowledge and understanding all people have the capability to achieve goals and have purpose. Education is a conduit to realising ones potential and therefore ones own mana.

Aotearoa-New Zealand is a country that essentially believes that everyone deserves a fair opportunity. Creating an environment where knowledge is accessible to all, people are enabled to explore their own potential, to realise their own mana and therefore have a sense of control over ones life is imperative. *E ngā mana, e ngā reo* acknowledges the way to achieve this is diverse and the current one size fits all approach is outdated.

Literally **whakapapa** means genealogy but to te iwi Māori it is much more. Te iwi Māori have a kinship system that links each to one another and the environment. Whakapapa was associated with birth rights, one's connection to a people, a marae or a district. Traditionally, much time and energies were spent learning and understanding these links. In times of need these links were called upon to act on a common cause or to achieve a common goal. Whakapapa would also predispose individuals to responsibilities in a larger unit such as whānau, hapū or iwi linked by a common ancestor. These responsibilities to the larger group, although burdensome sometimes guaranteed the support and security of the collective and was therefore a reciprocal relationship.

Regardless of the blood ties that bind us, whakapapa is a latent connection that needs to be nurtured and worked on to ensure ties are strengthened. Asking for assistance from a relationship that has not been cultivated may well be rejected. Kinship ties are strengthened through the process of **manaakitanga** and **aroha**, showing kindness, being generous, caring and helping each other. In essence whakapapa is the social expression of genes; it's about relationships and belonging.

Aotearoa-New Zealand is a multicultural society with a diverse ethnic background and therefore using whakapapa as a principle that is inclusive is not practical. However, whakapapa has several underlying ideologies that are highly relevant today. **Whakawhanaungatanga** is a broad term used frequently in te iwi Māori. Whakawhanaungatanga is about nurturing relationships between individuals and groups of people. Whakawhanaungatanga does not require kinship ties; it is beyond kinship. Through whakawhanaungatanga, people become whānau or near kin through shared experiences and positive relationships. This relationship can occur in any community. People can share

common aspirations and come together for a common purpose. These relationships are still strengthened through *manaakitanga* and *aroha*. If people have a sense of belonging to a community, then they will also share a responsibility to that community. We are social creatures and our wellbeing is based on the quality of our relationships with others. This is especially true for children. Whanaungatanga is about building and strengthening relationships and as is the case in all relationships, they come with responsibilities and obligations to each another.

### **Putting it all together**

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki

*A valued mat can not be woven from one strand* - The tapestry of our sustenance and wellbeing cannot be woven by one strand alone.

Historically, approaches to the promotion of population health have been based on a deficit model. Problems are identified and then resources are made available to fix such problems. Deficit models are inclined to define people and communities in negative terms. They have a tendency to set parameters that need to be met and if not, you are officially unwell. Another common approach is a focus on the individual with key messages that state that the ones behaviour is contrary to wellbeing and that they should conduct themselves in a different manner commonly referred to as behaviour change. Often suggested behaviours are impracticable, unfeasible and unimaginable. They fail to account for context such as history, culture, economics, capacity and psychology.

As the positive health model suggests, a values based approach could be a more positive and meaningful way to approach population health. A values approach focuses less on behaviour changes, rather more on what makes us human and why. True wellbeing is a holistic fabric comprising of many entwining interrelated strands - **whenu tangata** – *Human strands*. By valuing the tapu nature of a person and their mauri you are recognising their many strands including the physical, physiological, emotional, social and spiritual strands. No one aspect sits alone as they are all connected in some way and therefore a focus on one will impact on another. No one is more important than another, and where one strand is weak, another may be propped up by a strand that is strong. Therefore under this model, happiness is preventative to heart disease. Fitness is conducive to mental health. Strong family and social links supports positive emotions. Belief and meaning can be a conduit to healthy lifestyles.

A values based approach means that there is less focus on individual behaviour change and more of a focus on strengthening and nurturing relationships or whakawhanaungatanga. The ideal foundation from which to launch wellbeing based initiatives are in environments where there are positive relationships and social harmony. Happy homes, enjoyable workplaces, safe communities are all based on healthy positive relationships. Strengthening whānau and communities has to be a major focus in public health nutrition and physical activity. Strong whānau and communities can identify issues for themselves and be empowered to develop their own solutions. When relationships are strong within whānau and communities, there is a sense of responsibility to one another giving health initiatives more persuasive powers. The whenu tangata also recognises that healthy relationships can lead to positive health and/or positive health can lead to healthy relationships.

There is a belief within te iwi Māori that within each person there is the capacity for growth and development and that everyone is born with particular talents. Recognising the mana of an individual is recognising their talent and their strengths. When abilities are recognised, there is a need to provide the appropriate stimulus or stimuli to activate their undeveloped

positive qualities. Therefore encouraging achievement is another component of the values based approach. Whatever the goals are in life, achieving them brings a sense of joy and satisfaction. Life should be made up of minor goals and major objectives. Māori has a word called '*puka noa*' which means 'without purpose' and has particularly bad connotations. So too does '*koretake*' meaning 'useless' but literally means '*without cause*'. A goals based approach to life gives direction and meaning and should be instilled early in life. To do great deeds, to try your best and to 'give it everything you got' are strong Māori values that can be embraced by all. Achieving goals strengthens 'Ngā Whenu Tangata' and will therefore improve health and wellbeing.

Māui is a hero famous throughout all of Polynesia. His deeds and achievements are renowned. He was an explorer, an inventor, pushed boundaries and possessed great determination and fortitude. Within the accounts of Maui we learn values, we learn social etiquette, we learn appropriate behaviour. However from all the many treasures Māui has bequeathed us, one is most prominent. Māui was a still birth child and the youngest of five brothers and one sister. Through skill, intelligence and a penchant for pushing the boundaries he elevated himself to be the most important and most celebrated of all his brothers. This is the Māui message to us. No matter what position you find yourself, with skill and determination, you can achieve. When ones own mana is recognised then the pathway to realising ones potential advances. *Tihei Mauri Ora!*

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