

Rongoā: A Māori System of Healing

Ara, he pai ake te kaupare atu i te tuku i te mate kia pā mai, ā, ka rongoā ai.

Prevention is better than a cure.

Rongoā, a māori system of healing, was well developed before European settlers arrived in Aotearoa.

By Ranui Maxwell



Rongoā in its most basic form can be described as treating, preserving, and applying medicines, to find a solution to a problem. Rongoā can also be described as traditional Māori medicine – a system of healing.

A Rongoā Māori approach focuses on the essence (life force properties) within each plant, the whakapapa (genealogy) of each plant and the environment they inhabit and includes the whakapapa of the healer and the one being healed.

. The modern practice of Rongoā, is practiced by many who often treat and care for their iwi, hapu and whānau without financial gain. A recent graduate of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, Diploma in Rongoā level 5 says “we collect Rongoā free of charge from our taiao (environment) and therefore we don’t charge our whānau for what they need”.

“Sometimes it is also about building the capability within our whānau so they can take care of themselves”.

From a Te Ao Māori perspective, the relationship with water is considered important to many of our tikanga and kawa (protocols and practices). Most believe that we are born from water, it is a giver of life and the connection to water is embedded in our cultural identity. However our drowning rates paint a different picture.

Small rural communities like Ōpōtiki, Tōrere, Te Kaha and Omaio have access to one supermarket, two pharmacies and a couple of medical centers often travel of 45 minutes is required to access these places and products. Rongoā māori plays an important role in rural communities, ensuring that people have access to medicines to treat afflictions. This was particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

Māori systems for treating illness were well developed before Europeans arrived in Aotearoa. There is evidence of quite detailed knowledge of anatomy, an understanding of physiological principles, and a recognition of the healing properties of various plants. This is also evidenced in our pūrakau (stories), waiata (songs) and whakapapa.



Evidencing mātauranga māori systems is identified as a key objective for Healthy Families East Cape. When it comes to Rongoā Māori we support our whānau being able to practice their traditional knowledge when it comes to their personal and collective health journey.

Māori have a philosophical understanding that Papatuanuku (earth mother) nurtures and sustains us, as our own mothers would, then it is not hard to believe that everything that we need to be well can be found in our taiao (environment).

What we now understand is that our relationship with our taiao is important not only for our overall hauora, but provides benefits for our mental health.

Pre-colonial times, our taiao provided much of what we needed to sustain and treat us, most people knew how each leaf, branch, berry or root helped with any ailment. This is extended to the food that we grow in the maara (garden).

Rongoā māori has long been practiced by Māori both as a prevention solution and in the management of people's overall health and well-being.

In 1800 – 1900, there was a significant decline in the overall health and mental wellbeing of Māori. This can be attributed to the diseases that the European settlers brought with them. Māori had no immunity to these diseases like yellow fever, cholera, malaria and typhus. Māori understood that these diseases needed to be treated with Western medicine. Māori also suffered a decline in population that can be attributed to foreign diseases.

The new health reforms and introduction of Pae Ora, the new Māori health system, Te Aka Whai Ora (the Māori Health authority) have acknowledged the important role Rongoā plays in the health and wellbeing of Māori.

The Te Aka Whai Ora rongoā Māori work programme will be shaped by rongoā practitioners and whānau Māori.

It has three key workstreams intended to: surface Māori priorities and aspirations for preserving, protectand support rongoā Māori to understand the mechanisms that are needed within the health system to support those Māori priorities and aspirations for the sustainability; and viability of these important services to identify the funding paths and other resources needed for a sustainable rongoā Māori sector.

“A key part of Te Aka Whai Ora’s role at the heart of the new health system is to ensure the voice of whānau is heard and helps shape health services and the future of Māori health,” Hon Nanaia Mahuta says.

“It is also central to Te Pae Tata, the nationwide plan that sets out the first two years of action for Te Aka Whai Ora and Te Whatu Ora as we transform the health system.”