

The Patient and Fānau (Family) experiences of Pacific Peoples on the cancer continuum in Aotearoa New Zealand

Background

Pacific peoples in Aotearoa face higher cancer incidence, more late-stage diagnoses, higher rates of preventative cancers and lower survival rates compared to European / other ethnicities.

Some of the inequities Pacific peoples in Aotearoa experience across the cancer continuum include:

- 11% more likely to be diagnosed with cancer, and 38% more likely to die from the disease.
- Greater exposure to cancer risk factors such as tobacco, alcohol, poor nutrition and obesity.
- People in socio-economically deprived areas are less likely to be diagnosed early. Over half of Pacific peoples live in more deprived areas and face persistent challenges such as overcrowded housing, low home-ownership, and material hardship.
- Poorer access to primary care due to the cost of doctors visits, limited availability of appointments, work/caregiving commitments and transport barriers.
- Cancer survival is poorer, reflecting late diagnosis and barriers to timely, effective treatment.
- Significantly lower participation rates across breast, cervical, and bowel cancer screening programmes.

Aims / Purpose

Te Aho o Te Kahu Cancer Control Agency commissioned Pacific led research company Moana Connect to undertake this study to:

- Better understand Pacific cancer patients and their fānau (family) lived experiences of cancer
- Identify key challenges Pacific cancer patients and their fānau face
- Gain insights from Pacific patients and fānau on how the healthcare system could be more effective and culturally appropriate.

Method: Pacific-led Talanoa Approach

- Research was based in Auckland where Aotearoa's largest Pacific population reside.
- The approach embedded Pacific values using the *Talanoa* method of face-to-face informal discussions for respectful and easier sharing of personal traumatic experiences.
- Patients had individual talanoa and fānau members had a group talanoa.
- Most talanoa were conducted in English based on peoples' preferences. Two individual talanoa were conducted in Tongan.

Participants

- 18 people: 12 people with cancer and 6 fānau members who supported a person with cancer.
- Participants included Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, and Cook Island Māori ethnicities.
- Cancer types included breast (3), stomach, bowel, liver (2), ovarian, uterine, prostate, lung, leukaemia, and one unknown. *One patient had two types of cancer.

References

He Pūrongo Mate Pukupuku o Aotearoa 2025 – The State of Cancer in New Zealand 2025. Te Aho o Te Kahu Cancer Control Agency. Ministry of Health. Annual Data Explorer 2024/25: New Zealand Health Survey

Themes from fānau feedback

Clear, respectful communication

Health professionals to:

- Provide diagnosis to patient with fānau/support person present.
- Give people time to digest information before providing more.
- Have a translator present when needed.

Clear, culturally aligned information

- Increase public awareness of cancer signs, risks, prevention, healthier lifestyles and screening options.
- Information available in multiple formats and languages.

Recognise and support role of Fānau

- Highlight access to mental health and wellbeing services, financial support, community care and health services.
- Fānau in the room for decisions.

Culturally safe pathways

- Fānau are default navigators due to a shortage of culturally informed workforce.
- Greater Pacific workforce needed.
- Educate non-Pacific staff on the cultural needs of Pacific patients and fānau.

Faster referrals for investigation

- Strengthen primary care access and engagement.
- Primary care providers need to make faster referrals for investigations.

Promote screening

- Better access to screening for earlier detection and diagnosis.
- Greater awareness of screening using targeted media campaigns.

Traditional therapies

- Education for Health Professionals about how traditional therapies can complement conventional treatments.

Spirituality and faith

- Spirituality and faith are essential as they promote hope, family unity, resilience and coping strategies.

Conclusions

For Pacific peoples in this study, cancer is a shared fānau journey. Both patients and fānau face emotional, financial, and practical pressures. Fānau often have to guide their loved ones through a complex system due to the shortage of staff who understand Pacific cultures.

The challenges identified can be addressed by taking a Pacific family-focused approach across the whole health system. Barriers to care need to be removed and safer, culturally appropriate pathways created.

To improve cancer care, better culturally relevant information, stronger screening and awareness programmes, more Pacific workers in cancer services, and meaningful family involvement in decisions are needed.