

A MĀORI APPROACH TO ORAL HEALTH CARE



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NGĀI TAHU

My iwi comes from Te Tai Poutini in Te Waipounamu, the South Island, but I grew up in Lyall Bay near Wellington airport.

At school I worked hard and my grades were consistently good but I wasn't a high achiever. I didn't do well with the exam format of learning and ended high school with merit endorsement.

Deciding on Dentistry

Before I left high school I went to the dentist for my last free check-up. I remember sitting in the chair thinking, "This is the kind of job I can see myself doing." It ticked all the right boxes. I wanted a job that I enjoyed where I could use my hands, problem solve and work with people.

With that in mind I went to a few open nights for universities to hear about career pathways and did a bit of research before deciding to study dentistry. I took a jumpstart physics summer course before starting first year health science and a year later, was accepted to study dentistry at the University of Otago.

Coping During the Tough Times

I soon got homesick and stressed with studies but the University Māori Centre helped with tutoring and free counselling. That's what helped me get through the exam stress, depressive thinking and family struggles while I was away from home.

My biggest struggle at the beginning was paying for the hall where I stayed. I applied for all the student loans I could get to cover my books and course costs and my parents and iwi gave me a little as well. But I paid for my studies mostly on my own and worked every summer holidays.

Māori Whakamā Around Oral Health

Many Māori experience whakamā or shame because of poor oral health which can prevent them from engaging in the oral healthcare system.

It's also not affordable for them. I've had family members remove their own teeth with pliers because they couldn't access oral healthcare. My goal is to run a practice that focusses primarily on whole whānau care. I want to stop this state of whakamā and enable Māori to take charge of their own oral health. To change home habits successfully, the whole whānau needs to participate.

Transition to the Workforce

In my last year of study I met my current employer at a job fair. Although I had a two-minute interview with them, we seemed to like each other so they hired me for their Katikati practise. Then my flatmate who was also a dentist moved to Auckland and left his position in Waihi. I applied for his position to increase my hours and got it, so I work in Waihi two days a week and Katikati three days a week.

The best part about my work is making people smile. Treating people to get them out of pain and get healthy beautiful smiles again makes the job worthwhile.