A review of research studies into the quality of public hospital care in New Zealand has highlighted clear disparities for Māori inpatients in several clinical areas.

The HRC-funded study by Dr Juliet Rumball-Smith from the Department of Public Health and General Practice at the University of Otago, Christchurch, involved a review of eleven studies examining the issue of quality of care and ethnicity for specific conditions and procedures within the public hospital system.

The studies reviewed examined the quality of care for Māori compared to non-Māori within public hospitals in New Zealand, covering six distinct clinical conditions. “Every single study found a difference in the care received by Māori compared to that received by New Zealand Europeans.”

“In some cases the control for potential confounding factors allowed me to conclude that these differences were inappropriate - that there was evidence for inexplicable disparities in health care quality for Māori. These differences couldn’t be explained by factors such as deprivation or severity of condition, and were linked to poorer health outcomes for Māori.” Dr Rumball-Smith says the evidence was particularly robust for the studies on obstetric intervention.

Two other studies that looked at cardiac intervention found that while Māori are at greater need of bypass surgery and angioplasty, they are less likely to receive that care.

Other studies found differences in the rates of preventable adverse events for Māori, and the care received by Māori suffering from end-stage renal disease and mental illness.

Whilst all these investigations have already been published, Dr Rumball-Smith’s review simply put the results of these studies together in one document, enabling the extent of the issue to be identified.

The next research stage will examine readmission rates throughout New Zealand, and the employment of a standardised satisfaction survey, to further ascertain the presence of ethnic health care disparities for Māori within the public hospital system.

This research is funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand.