

Bridging the gap between Pacific health needs and the Pacific health workforce

There is currently a major gap between the Pacific population in New Zealand and the number of Pacific health workers available to meet the community's needs.

HRC Pacific PhD student Roannie Ng Shiu intends to help close this gap by investigating the barriers and determinants for young Pacific people entering tertiary level health education.

"Throughout my study I have always had a strong focus on Pacific issues. At the moment my focus is on Pacific health students," Ms Ng Shiu says.

Only small numbers of Pacific people are entering the health education system and little is known about the support they receive both in and outside of the home.

Ms Ng Shiu will follow a group of year two Samoan students enrolled in a variety of health courses at the University of Auckland for one year.

Ms Ng Shiu says evidence has shown Pacific Island medical students tend to drop out in their second year of study; the transition year between their foundation year and proper medical undergraduate training.

Through in-depth focus groups, Ms Ng Shiu will investigate all aspects of the students' lives looking at how social and context impacts on their learning and academic success. Areas such as ethnicity, socio-economic factors, gender, family support, family history in tertiary study, academic and training support, academic ability and peer support, will all provide valuable information.

"What I really want to do is get in-depth detail about their life at university and also their life at home," she says. Very little is known about family support for tertiary Pacific students.

Focus groups will also be conducted with the students' families and relevant community members to get a rounded view.

Ms Ng Shiu says focus groups will be an opportunity for the study participants to talk about ideas and beliefs. Beginning with a smaller pilot group of around four to five students and four to five family and community members, Ms Ng Shiu will determine the key themes that will drive the rest of the project.

Ms Ng Shiu says targeted funding is available to Pacific students, and some major tertiary institutions have good support networks for Pacific students. However, many institutions do not have this support and there are not enough formal, specific strategies in place to help support Pacific health students in New Zealand.

One of the key goals of the project is to identify and inform strategies in which a competent Pacific health workforce can be grown locally to improve the health and disability outcomes for Pacific peoples.

"I hope to formulate strategies and programmes in which to bridge their home life and their study life and get their families more engaged in the students' studies," Ms Ng Shiu says.

This will involve collaboration with organisations such as Counties Manukau District Health Board, who also have a keen interest in improving the numbers of Pacific health care workers.

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HRC85 2007
Level 3, 110 Stanley Street, Auckland PO Box 5541,
Wellesley Street, Auckland, NZ
Telephone 64 9 303 5200 Facsimile 64 9 377 9988
Website www.hrc.govt.nz



Roannie Ng Shiu

Key words:

Pacific population, health workers, education

Key facts:

- New Zealand is currently experiencing a shortage of health care workers
- Pacific peoples make up six per cent of the NZ population but only one per cent of NZ's medical workforce
- Only five per cent of Pacific school leavers from South Auckland enter a health-related tertiary programme.

Aims of this research:

- To better understand the contextual factors influencing Pacific students entering health-related tertiary study and identify strategies which will encourage Pacific peoples to take up health-related tertiary study
- To identify strategies which will provide support to Pacific students and encourage timely graduation from health education programmes
- To grow a competent pool of qualified Pacific health workers.