Dr Ofa Dewes was recently awarded a PhD from The University of Auckland, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, for her thesis entitled: Obesity Prevention Among Pacific Adolescents: Is there a Role for the Church? Dr Dewes is based at the School of Population Health’s Pacific Health Section as a Research Fellow/Project Manager. She has strong personal and professional links with a number of Pacific countries which have influenced the direction of the research in her thesis.

Ofa’s thesis combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data for the quantitative component came from the Obesity Prevention in Communities (OPIC) study, an adolescent school-based sample with a high prevalence of obesity. Ofa analysed data from 2,495 Pacific students in this cross-sectional survey. She followed this up with a community fono with 50 church leaders in South Auckland, individual meetings with the ministers of 20 churches, and a separate qualitative survey of 23 church leaders to gain greater depth of understanding about the issues associated with obesity in the Pacific churches of Auckland.

“I investigated the associations between church attendance and obesity-related lifestyle behaviours among adolescents from different Pacific ethnic groups in New Zealand,” says Dr Dewes. Ofa found that Pacific students who attended church had higher obesity levels (as measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI)) than those who did not attend church. She identified some lifestyle behaviours which could be contributing to the higher BMI in church attendees. These included a higher likelihood of sourcing breakfast and lunch from school canteens or dairies, less frequent walking or biking to school, and limited knowledge of obesity risk factors. “These behaviours could further exacerbate the higher obesity prevalence and its associated consequences among the Pacific population in New Zealand,” says Dr Dewes.

On the other hand, church attendees were more likely to report having a supportive family and community environment for healthy eating and physical activity than non-attendees. Ofa found in her interviews with church leaders that they acknowledged obesity was a key issue facing Pacific churches, that they perceived themselves as role models for healthy lifestyle standards at church and at home, and that they supported church-based health promotion programmes.

Dr Dewes says that effective strategies for Pacific adolescents are likely to be

(Continued on page 2)
those that focus on raising the awareness of obesity-related risk factors, promoting healthy food and drink consumption including sourcing breakfast and lunch from home, and increasing physical activity levels. “A logical venue for weight management and effective lifestyle change agent may be the church,” she adds.

Ofa’s findings highlight the urgent need for culturally appropriate and ethnic-specific weight management interventions, including monitoring and policy development programmes, to be implemented now. Dr Dewes has presented these findings at several international conferences and is currently writing papers, based on her thesis, for publication.

She is also providing leadership and operational management for the HRC-funded successor project to OPIC, called Fanau FAB, a family-focused randomised controlled trial on food, activity and behaviour for Pacific children aged 5–12 years and their parents/primary caregivers.

Born and raised in Fiji, Ofa is of Rotuman, Tongan and Tuvaluan ethnicity. Prior to immigrating to New Zealand in 1989, she worked for the United Nations Development Programme Regional Office in Fiji. She is also a committed Christian and actively involved with her local church and community in South Auckland.

Ofa was supervised by Professor Robert Scragg, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department, Associate Professor Raina Elley, Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice, and Emeritus Professor David Thomas, Social and Community Health. She is indebted to her supervisory team, the school Principals, teachers, parents, students and church leaders from South Auckland, for her PhD award. “It has been an amazing educational experience and I thank my sons Roydon, Graham and Mark also, for their encouragement and support, faiaksia,” says Dr Dewes.

Information: Dr Ofa Dewes
The University of Auckland

(Continued from page 1)
Pacific Edge: Transforming Knowledge into Innovative Practice
18 - 19 April 2012 | Waipuna Hotel and Conference Centre, Auckland

Fono 2012, through its theme - *Pacific Edge: Transforming Knowledge into Innovative Practice* - will provide an opportunity for Pacific and non-Pacific peoples, researchers, health professionals and communities from New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific, to deliberate, and lead Pacific health research knowledge that will inform innovative practice.

The first HRC Pacific Health Research Fono was held in September 2002. The focus for this, and subsequent Fonos, was to provide opportunities for Pacific health research to be showcased, profiled and promoted.

**Fono Objectives:**

Fono 2012 will serve as a significant opportunity:

1. **To disseminate knowledge** - While there may be organisational opportunities where the recipients of HRC awards can share their work with their peers and colleagues, there are limited opportunities for researchers to profile their work to the wider Pacific and non-Pacific communities, both in New Zealand and abroad.

2. **For stakeholders, researchers and health professionals to form and develop networks with those in health and research fields, funding entities and research organisations.**

3. **To connect Pacific peoples to the work of the HRC, in terms of strengthening and building Pacific research capacity.**

**Fono Outcomes:**

1. **Knowledge Transmission** - Career development recipients/researchers will share their research with Pacific/ non Pacific communities both verbally and in print.

2. **Relationship Building** - Strengthened ties between the HRC and community of Pacific researchers/ stakeholders/funders.

3. **Capacity Building** - Pacific peoples encouraged to consider health research as a career pathway.

**Keynote speaker:**

Dr Sela Panapasa is the keynote speaker at Fono 2012. She is Assistant Research Scientist in the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. Her work includes research on family support and intergenerational exchanges, population dynamics, racial/ethnic disparities and population-based survey research. Dr Panapasa is Principal Investigator for numerous projects, including a study of Pacific Islander American health, the assessment of federal data on Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, an examination of cancer disparities among US Pacific Islanders, and the development of a Comprehensive Plan for Pacific Island United Methodism in the United States. She is presently an investigator for the Future Public Health Leaders Program at the University of Michigan, designed to introduce minority and underrepresented undergraduate students to the field of Public Health. Dr Panapasa is a Pacific Islander of Rotuman, Tongan, and Tuvalu descent, originally from Fiji. She received her PhD in sociology and demography from Brown University and completed a two year National Institute on Aging post-doctoral fellowship at the ISR Population Studies Center. She is nationally recognised in the United States as an expert on Pacific Islander health.

**Call for Abstracts and Papers**

Researchers are invited to submit an abstract of their research to be considered for presentation at the Fono. The abstract should align to the theme of the Fono - *Pacific Edge: Transforming Knowledge into Innovative Practice* - and be relevant to one of the following streams:

- **Youth**
- **Non Communicable Diseases**
- **Communicable Diseases**
- **New Directions in Health**
- **Disability**
- **Mental Health**
- **Capacity Building**

Please check the HRC Fono website: [http://pacificfono.hrc.govt.nz](http://pacificfono.hrc.govt.nz) regularly for updates. For any other information, contact Dr Nuhisifa Seve-Williams, Project Manager, Pacific Health Research, telephone DDI (09) 303 5225, mobile 021 588 155 or email: nseve-williams@hrc.govt.nz.
The role of language in the development of preschool social understanding

Dr Mele Taumoepeau

For the past three years, Dr Mele Taumoepeau from the University of Otago, Dunedin, has been researching a dimension of health and wellbeing of Pacific children that has received very little attention, namely the role of language in the development of preschool social understanding.

A child's understanding of the social world is a critical part of children's early development. Understanding the social world includes being able to predict and interpret behaviour. For example, understanding the emotional consequences of behaviour, or understanding how behaviour might lead to certain emotional experiences is a critical aspect of children's socio-emotional development. A lack of these skills makes it extremely difficult to function effectively, and has implications for later internalising and externalising behaviours.

While one can go some way towards understanding behaviour through the observation of behaviour, a large part of our lives involves interpreting behaviour based on what we can't observe, such as, other people's beliefs, desires and emotional responses. Being able to "read" a person's mind allows us to efficiently navigate our social interactions. An important aspect of the development of mind reading abilities in children involves the development of language skills, particularly being able to talk about non-concrete concepts that refer to internal and emotional states such as what we want, think, know and like. Therefore, while we can learn about our social world through the observation of behaviour, we also learn about our social world through learning to talk about the mind.

Talking about the mind helps children in several ways. It gives children the tools to talk about their own thoughts and feelings, it helps them reflect on the important idea that people have thoughts and feelings different from their own, and consequently enables children to become social and cultural participants.

While a large body of research points to the beneficial effect of parent-child conversations that include references to our internal states, such as our thoughts, feelings and desires, there is virtually no information about the cultural generalisability of these findings. There are good arguments to suggest that the path to understanding the social world via discussions about the mind might differ, depending on our cultural and ethnic orientation.

Mele brings the relevance of culture into focus by examining the relative importance of parent-child discussions about internal states in families that identify as Pacific. Is talking about the mind as important for Pacific children's social understanding or are there other social avenues through which children learn about their social world?

Using a short-term longitudinal design, Mele has followed the children and principal caregivers of 45 families who identify as Pacific from when the children were 15 months to when they turned 39 months. She has obtained language samples of parents and their children in reading and play tasks, and examined the rate of internal state language use over this period. Preliminary findings show that the strength of Pacific ethnic identity is related to the extent to which a parent discusses internal states with his or her child, with families who identify very highly as Pacific as less likely to refer to internal states. Importantly however, the presence of older siblings in this group of Pacific families plays a significant role in children's social development, suggesting that very young children benefit later from the interactions they have with siblings.

Preliminary findings thus point to a variety of ways in which children's early socio-emotional development is supported. The implications of these findings and further research associated with these findings is that it provides us with important insights into how we can best develop and support socio-emotional development in very young Pacific children growing up in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Information: Dr Mele Taumoepeau
The University of Otago, Dunedin
✆ (03) 479 4029
✉ mele@psy.otago.ac.nz
2012 Pacific Career Development Awards

Investment in the development of the future health research workforce is an essential and important activity for the HRC. The HRC builds research capacity through its Career Development Awards and the support of emerging researchers on HRC-funded contracts. The HRC has recently awarded the following Pacific Career Development Awards:

**Pacific Health Summer Studentships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>Award Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Ashalyna Noa</td>
<td>University of Canterbury</td>
<td>Canterbury Earthquake: Impact on Pacific Health Provision</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Rochelle Newport</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>Health Promotion and Pacific Peoples</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
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</table>

**Pacific Health PhD Scholarship**

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<th>Award Amount</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Liliani ‘Atiola</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>How Food Policy Awards Impact Healthy Village Action Zone (HVAZ) Churches</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Tupuna Mataio</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>Cook Island Adolescents Perception and Behaviour of Alcohol Use in Auckland</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Eliza Puna</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>Identifying Risk Factors Associated with Pacific Suicide in New Zealand</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Sara Samuelu</td>
<td>University of Otago, Dunedin</td>
<td>The Effects on Breast Cancer in Pacific Women and Cancer Survival Rates in Regions with most Pacific Island Residents</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
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**Pacific Health Masters Scholarships**

<table>
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<th>Student Name</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Project Title</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms Rochelle Newport</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>Going Local: Impact of Sustainable Development Policies on Health in Rarotonga</td>
<td>$18,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Jacqueline Schmidt-Busby</td>
<td>The University of Auckland</td>
<td>Diabetes: Impact on Work, Income and Finances in Samoan Families</td>
<td>$18,253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pacific HRC Committee members at work

From left to right: Dr Mele Ma’ata Taumoepa, Professor Tagaloatele Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop (Chair), Dr Ieti Lima and Dr Etuate Saafi.

Absent: Mr Russell Blakelock and Dr Faafetai Sopoaga.
New Pacific Health Research Initiative

A joint initiative between the HRC and the Ministry of Health has been established to support Pacific-led health research focusing on issues of importance to Pacific peoples. The research supported through this partnership will identify ways to better enable Pacific peoples and communities to be healthy and increase their health knowledge.

This approach is consistent with ‘Ala Mo‘ūi: Pathways to Pacific Health and Wellbeing 2010-2014, which sets out the priority outcomes and actions for the next five years that will contribute to achieving the Government’s overarching goal that all New Zealanders, including Pacific people, lead longer, healthier and more independent lives.

The joint initiative will be Request for Proposals (RFP) driven and will have two overarching aims:

- To support high quality and relevant Pacific health research in priority areas that will contribute towards achieving better health outcomes for Pacific people, families and communities; and
- To foster the development of the Pacific health research workforce through support for research networks and collaborations, and provision of research grant funding.

Network Grants

As a first step, the HRC will be launching Networking Grants for researchers. The $5,000 HRC Networking Grants aim to facilitate contact between researchers to allow for the development of collaborative teams. Networking Grants will also support community consultation and engagement as well as planning for proposals to be submitted in response to the RFP.

Funding will be provided for up to four Networking grants of $5,000 each. Grants can include reasonable and actual costs of networking, including meetings and tele/video conferences.

Full details and the Networking Grants Application Form and Guidelines will be made available shortly on the HRC website: www.hrc.govt.nz.

Request for Proposals

The second step will involve a RFP calling for applications outlining Pacific health research using appropriate methodology and including engagement with Pacific communities. Research proposals will have a well-developed knowledge transfer strategy and will address one or more of the key areas outlined in ‘Ala Mo‘ūi (child and youth health, lessening common risk factors for ill health, preventing and managing long-term conditions).

Proposed research projects will also be Pacific-led, will outline collaborative research teams and networks, and will incorporate opportunities for early career Pacific researchers (post-PhD). The RFP document will be available on the HRC website and will include full details of the research sought, the available funding pool and application and assessment timelines.

About HRC Pacific News

Current and past issues of HRC Pacific News can be viewed on the HRC website: www.hrc.govt.nz.

Contributions are welcome. All articles in HRC Pacific News may be reprinted, provided the source is acknowledged.

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Upcoming closing dates

Projects - Invited Full Applications
16 December 2011

Research Partnerships for New Zealand Health Delivery 2012 - Expression of Interest
26 January 2012

Ngā Kanohi Kitea - Project Grant - Full Applications
17 February 2012

Pacific Health Research Postdoctoral Fellowship (Online submission – Applications close) and Pacific Health Research Development Grants (Paper submission – Applications close)
20 February 2012

Ngā Kanohi Kitea - Hard copies of full applications due at the HRC
22 February 2012

Ngā Kanohi Kitea - Applicant rebuttal period (3 - 11 March 2012)
11 March 2012

The HRC website, www.hrc.govt.nz/funding-opportunities/calendar, lists all Registration and Expression of Interest opening and closing dates.