

## HRC-funded OPIC survey supports capacity building in Pacific health research

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



Dr Ofa Dewes with her sons (left to right) Mark, Graham and Roydon

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)*



### Call for Abstracts and Papers

Researchers are invited to submit an abstract of their research to be considered for presentation at Fono 2012. See page 3 for details.

# Message from the Pacific HRC Chair

*Malo ni, Fakatalofa atu Malo e lelei, Kia Orana, Fakalofa lahi atu, Ni Sa Bula and warm Pacific greetings!*



Professor Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop

The Pacific HRC Committee have been steadily working on an exciting programme for 2012. This includes:

- **HRC Pacific Research Fono:**

The main aim of the Fono is to share Pacific health research findings, particularly ways of ensuring that this research is used to inform further research, and policy and programme planning. As we all know, even the best research is doomed to

the bookshelves unless intentional steps are taken to ensure dissemination and discussion. We're excited to have Dr Sela Panapasa from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research as our keynote speaker. The Call for Abstracts has gone out and details can be found on page 3.

- **New Pacific Health Research Initiative:** We are pleased to announce a joint initiative between the HRC and the Ministry of Health, which has been established to support Pacific-led health research focusing on issues of importance to Pacific peoples. Read more on page 6.

Unfortunately, not all of the funding for the **Pacific Career Development Awards** was allocated this year. According to the Pacific CDA Committee report: a) there were fewer applications in 2011; and b) a significant number of applications were of "inadequate quality". This situation is not only disheartening, but it also makes it hard for us to argue for more Scholarships for Pacific health research. Clearly, there is work to be done to make sure our Pacific health research applications are robust. We appreciate that the HRC is running a second round of awards for the **Pacific Health Research Postdoctoral Fellowships** and the **Pacific Health Research Development Grants**. Read more on the HRC website: [www.hrc.govt.nz](http://www.hrc.govt.nz).

Faafetai for your support and we hope that we have served you well in 2011.

Manuia le kerisimasi ma le tausaga fou  
Professor Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop  
Chair, Pacific HRC Committee

(Continued from page 1)

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

☎ (09) 373 7599 ext 89354

✉ [o.dewes@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:o.dewes@auckland.ac.nz)

## Contact the Project Manager HRC Pacific Health Research

**Dr Nuhisifa Seve-Williams**

✉ [nseve-williams@hrc.govt.nz](mailto:nseve-williams@hrc.govt.nz)

☎ (09) 303 5225

**Mobile:** 021 588 155

**Website:** [www.hrc.govt.nz](http://www.hrc.govt.nz)





## 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

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.

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

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>

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](mailto: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. How we interact with our children is closely aligned to our cultural values and expectations.

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](mailto: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

### Miss Ashalya Noa

University of Canterbury

*Canterbury Earthquake: Impact on Pacific Health Provision*

**\$5,000**

### Ms Rochelle Newport

The University of Auckland

*Health Promotion and Pacific Peoples*

**\$5,000**

### Miss Liliani 'Atiola

The University of Auckland

*How Food Policy Awards Impact Healthy Village Action Zone (HVAZ) Churches*

**\$5,000**

### Miss Tupuna Mataio

The University of Auckland

*Cook Island Adolescents Perception and Behaviour of Alcohol Use in Auckland*

**\$5,000**

### Miss Eliza Puna

The University of Auckland

*Identifying Risk Factors Associated with Pacific Suicide in New Zealand*

**\$5,000**

### Miss Sara Samuelu

University of Otago, Dunedin

*The Effects on Breast Cancer in Pacific Women and Cancer Survival Rates in Regions with most Pacific Island Residents*

**\$5,000**

## Pacific Health PhD Scholarship

### Miss Alana McCambridge

The University of Auckland

*Improving Upper-limb Impairment after Stroke with Novel Brain Stimulation*

**\$105,230**

## Pacific Health Masters Scholarships

### Ms Rochelle Newport

The University of Auckland

*Going Local: Impact of Sustainable Development Policies on Health in Rarotonga*

**\$18,253**

### Ms Jacqueline Schmidt-Busby

The University of Auckland

*Diabetes: Impact on Work, Income and Finances in Samoan Families*

**\$18,253**



## Pacific HRC Committee members at work

From left to right: Dr Mele Ma'ata Taumoepeau, 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'ui: Pathways to Pacific Health and Wellbeing 2010-2014*<sup>1</sup>, 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.

### Networking 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](http://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'ui* (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.

## 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](http://www.hrc.govt.nz/funding-opportunities/calendar), lists all Registration and Expression of Interest opening and closing dates.

<sup>1</sup> Minister of Health and Minister of Pacific Island Affairs. 2010. *'Ala Mo'ui: Pathways to Pacific Health and Wellbeing 2010-2014*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

## About HRC Pacific News

Current and past issues of *HRC Pacific News* can be viewed on the HRC website: [www.hrc.govt.nz](http://www.hrc.govt.nz).

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

If you would like to **subscribe** to *HRC Pacific News*, please email [info@hrc.govt.nz](mailto:info@hrc.govt.nz), put 'Subscribe HRC Pacific News' in the header and include your name and mailing address details. You can also use this email address to advise us if you no longer wish to receive *HRC Pacific News*.



Health Research Council of New Zealand  
Te Kaunihera Rangahau Hauora o Aotearoa

Phone: +64 9 303 5200  
Fax: +64 9 377 9988  
Level 3, 110 Stanley Street,  
Auckland  
PO Box 5541 Wellesley Street,  
Auckland 1141  
[www.hrc.govt.nz](http://www.hrc.govt.nz)