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## Small language steps, big rewards follow



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Three Rivers Medical practice owner Hiria Nielsen [image: supplied]

With Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori – Māori Language Week upon us this week, reporter **Alan Perrott** talks to two practices about the risk and reward of taking a bold move and trying something new

It's okay to feel nervous about tackling te reo Māori, says Aramoho Health practice manager Therese Zimmerman.

If you take it slowly, the rewards might surprise you, Ms Zimmerman says. "I'm no guru or expert in this, but we just started off by making small changes a few years ago, like changing our greetings in emails and on Facebook, and over time they've just become what we do.

"My confidence has improved. I'm still not great at pronunciation, but when you're part of a team, all doing the same thing, I do feel more comfortable trying and some of that fear of getting it wrong has gone away."

The Whanganui practice began normalising use of te reo Māori to earn the equity module for RNZCGP Cornerstone accreditation.

“That gave us a goal, which really helped push us along,” Ms Zimmerman says. It has been a gradual revolution, with use of written greetings followed by introduction of new phrases at staff meetings, then by learning waiata, karakia and whakataukī.

It helps that the practice has a former opera singer on staff, she says, and there is also safety in numbers as the practice has 40 staff, including 10 GPs, 15 nurses, a health improvement practitioner and a health coach.

All significant events at Aramoho Health now feature a mihi and waiata.

The practice runs a te reo Māori haiku competition. If the poems aren’t brilliant, it’s fun finding the right words to fit the rigid syllabic structure, Ms Zimmerman says.

They have even extended to medical applications, with health improvement practitioner Maggie Mowat holding waiata classes via Zoom to aid patients with breathing, calmness and wellbeing.

Te reo Māori is also used by staff at community-based vaccination clinics and Ms Zimmerman says the feedback from staff and patients has been overwhelmingly positive.

For Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori – Māori Language Week, she is putting together a playlist of songs.

Across town and via email, Three Rivers Medical practice owner and doctor Hiria Nielsen (Ngāti Porou, Rongomai-wahine, Ngāi Tāmanuhiri) admits to trepidation of her own about introducing te reo Māori to her workplace.

“As a Māori doctor and practice owner, I also had to put aside my fear of sharing aspects of te ao Māori with my work whānau. The fear of ‘doing something wrong’ or being judged by kaumātua and other Māori was crippling, but sharing karakia, waiata and tikanga with my colleagues can only help us connect with our community, so I decided to go for it.”

Despite being busy, staff set aside weekly 15-minute sessions for waiata and karakia. Whakairo (carvings) and rāranga (weaving) are displayed around the building to create an inviting space for Māori patients.

Dr Nielsen is also planning a staff trip to her haukainga (home) in Te Mahia and has commissioned a korowai for graduations.

While their journey is only starting, she says it has already had interesting spin-offs. During the height of the pandemic response, a GP emailed an image of his maunga back in the US. "This cascaded into all staff attaching their pepeha to his email and it became a way of connecting at a difficult time. It was also one of our doctors from Scotland who asked for waiata, and she sang our waiata at her daughter's graduation from medical school."

Dr Nielsen admits to some pushback from a tiny minority of patients who say the practice should focus on seeing more patients rather than self-care.

“So, I would say to other practices, do it. Seriously, just do it. It might feel like the least important thing to do given the current challenges, but it has helped our team survive this pandemic intact.

After meetings and huddles, it is a great feeling to pick up the guitar and finish on a happy note before we roll our sleeves up and get into our mahi.

“A big mihi to all our primary care teams around the motu putting in the hard yards, noho ora mai.”



Waiata practice at Aramoho Health in Whanganui [image: supplied]

## **Te reo Māori in general practice**

### **Ideas include:**

- › taking small steps first, such as using te reo in written greetings then introducing new phrases at staff meetings and learning waiata, karakia and whakataukī
- › running a te reo Māori haiku competition, and
- › holding 15-minute practice sessions for waiata and karakia each week.

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