Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
Pōneke Wellington Campus

Summer Studentships 2026/2027

PROJECT TITLE:
Barriers and facilitators to participation for peoples of Fiji in biomedical research using live human tissue models

AIM:
To the perspectives of Fijian/Fijian Indian health professionals, academic and cardiac care consumers views on biomedical research using live human tissue, discuss culturally appropriate ways to mitigate risks and accommodate diverse perspectives regarding tissue use, storage, access, return.

METHODS:
Conduct talanoa sessions in a flexible and semi structured manner with 3 demographically distinct Fijian/Fijian Indian groups: a) medical students/health professionals, b) research fellows/academics and c) cardiac care consumers and/or whanau; using open ended questions adapted from Thompson et al 2024. Audio recording will be transcribed for analysis. Features of both mainstream focus groups (pre-determined questions) and talanoa (open and close with elders blessings, conversational approach, in a neutral non-religious community friendly/Pacific space, with food, and oversight by Pacific staff) will be incorporated. Transcript analysis will be performed by 3 independent reviewers. The focus of transcript analysis will be on aspects that describe participants perspectives on how human tissue may be used for biomedical research and what provisions can be put in place by researcher to accommodate unique cultural preferences and/or diverse views (e.g. broad spectrum of consent options so that participation is inclusive, option to return any tissue at the conclusion of the live experiments for appropriate burial). Each reviewer will read the transcripts and identify important values and themes independently. All novel themes/values will be collated and prioritised through a process of discussion and consensus. The collated document will be circulated to the Live Human Tissue Model Pacific working group, for further review and refinement and preliminary results will be presented via a online webinar/zui to all participants, inviting further feedback. This will be written up and submitted to the Journal of Pacific Research for publication.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE:
Identifying the causal gene is a major milestone, but it is only the beginning. It often takes many more years of research to understand the gene's function, how it contributes to disease, and how it might be targeted therapeutically to prevent illness. There are already several approaches being used worldwide to address these questions. For example, patients undergoing elective procedures such as bypass surgery can consent to donate tissue that would otherwise be discarded. This allows researchers to study heart tissue from gene-positive individuals and better understand how specific genetic variants drive disease. Another approach involves collecting blood cells from patients, reprogramming them into stem cells, and then differentiating them into heart cells. These lab-grown cells can be used to screen potential drugs and identify treatments that may prevent or slow disease progression.

The collection and storage of human tissue (including blood, urine, saliva, and surgical samples) has been foundational to biomedical research. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this work is regulated under the Human Tissue Act 2008. However, the acceptability of these practices varies across communities, and some groups are understandably less likely to participate.

As we did at the outset of the Fiji Heart Study, it is essential to engage directly with communities. Through talanoa, we discussed community-identified needs, explored what participants would and would not want from the research, and openly addressed the risks and benefits of genetic studies. Together, we considered how to make participation as inclusive and safe as possible, and how to mitigate potential harms.

Now, as the science advances, we need to revisit these conversations. Moving beyond genetics alone, we are entering a space where we can grow human cells in the laboratory to study how genes function, contribute to disease, and respond to treatments. Ensuring that this work remains aligned with community values and expectations is just as important as the science itself.

STUDENT'S ROLE AND EXPOSURE TO SCIENTIFIC METHOD:
Organise and conduct 3 in-person talanoa sessions in collaboration with Pacific academic leads. Analysis of transcripts, presentation of findings, preparation of manuscript.

RELEVANT PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS (Education or Research):
Experience with qualitative research, thematic analysis and proficiency in conducting talanoa/online zui will be advantageous.

Main supervisor:	**Pritika Narayan**	
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Other Supervisor/s:	AP Kirsty Danielson & Malaeulu Seuta'afili Associate Professor Patrick Thomsen	
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	Can students work remotely?	Yes / No

References

Thompson O, *et al.* Use of bodily tissues in research – Pacific perspectives from Dunedin, New Zealand. *Pacific Health Dialog 2020; 21(5):245-252.* DOI: 10.26635/phd.2020.624