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Māori Research(er) in Three Poems

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Abstract

These three poems re-present the findings from a research project that took place in 2013 (Kidd et al. 2018, Kidd et al. 2014). The research explored what health literacy meant for Māori patients and whānau when they accessed palliative care. Through face-to-face interviews and focus groups we engaged with 81 people including patients, whānau, bereaved loved ones, support workers and health professionals. The poems are composite, written to bring some of our themes to life.

The first poem is titled Aue. This is a Māori lament that aligns to English words such as ‘oh no’, or ‘arrgh’, or ‘awww’. Each stanza of the poem re-presents some of the stories we heard throughout the research.

The second poem is called Tikanga. This is a Māori concept that encompasses customs, traditions and protocols. There are tikanga rituals and processes that guide all aspects of life, death, and relationships. This poem was inspired by an elderly man who explained that he would avoid seeking help from a hospice because ‘they leave tikanga at the door at those places’. His choice was to bear his pain bravely, with pride, within his cultural identity.

The third poem is called ‘People Like Me’. This is an autoethnographical reflection of what I experienced as a researcher which draws on the work of scholars such as bell hooks (1984), Laurel Richardson (1997) and Ruth Behar (1996). These and many other authors encourage researchers to use frustration and anger to inform our writing; to use our tears to fuel our need to publish our research.

1. Aue

Aue, e koro,
as you sit quietly in your armchair,
twisted hands resting atop your walking stick.
Head bowed,
grieving.

“They were so rude to her, our whaea.
I hated (fierce eyes)
seeing how she got smaller – you know?”
“Aroha mai, so sorry I’m late. My moko you see, he’s busy but he drives me everywhere. His pepe was sick, it made him late. Aroha mai, I’m sorry.”

“My wahine toa, my life, my wife – reduced to tears by a hard-eyed receptionist.”

“Well Mrs (mumblemumblemumble) your appointment is gone now. We will post you another one next month. It’s **Important** to be **On Time** you know.”

“She passed, my wife, not long after that.”

Aue.

***

Aue, wahine ma,

your face still showing the

shock.

The hurt.

“It didn’t have to be like that. We didn’t know!

They said ‘DNR’. Do Not Resuscitate. Doesn’t that mean

when he dies they won’t bring him back?”

Damp eyes. Wretched.

“Isn’t that what it means?

We think it should - we **know** it should. But now we know better now, don’t we kare?”

Daughter and mother nod together, huddle together

Weeping.

“DNR means more than that

And less.

He died in pain. He died in terror,

No breath, eyes and mouth pleading,

begging us to make it better.

We called for help, but no-one came

to that bare room

in the night.

No-one helped him.

We didn’t know! But

that’s not good enough.

We failed him, our tane.

All of us failed him.

It’s too late, way too late

to fix

*How am I supposed to live with that?*

Aue.

***

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Aue, e te whānau
“We cared for our mum first, then our dad
both so sick, but
we loved them and helped them to die peacefully
At home.
We taught those nurses, aye girls? And they taught us too
Team awesome, that’s us!
Take your shoes off
Wash your hands with this stuff before you touch her
Introduce yourself and wait, listen to her silences
Give this medicine if she’s in pain, and this one if she vomits
Look at her, really look, and be patient
Call this number, any time day or night, if you’re worried
We wrote down everything that happened. Listen to us, we know.
Change the tubing like this . . .
Have some kai with us, or a cup of tea
Use this on her lips
Ahhh, she’s leaving us soon
Yes, she’s leaving you soon.”
Aue.

2. Tikanga
Staunch man, moving proudly (but frail)
in his immaculate kitchen,
“I’m making you some tea, dear. Do you want a biscuit?”
Tikanga.
This research business can wait
until the important work of
knowing each other
is accomplished.
“Where are you from? Who is your whānau?
Have another biscuit. Another cuppa?”
Tikanga.
Settled, familiar
Now we move
cautiously
into new space.
“What do you want me to do, dear?”
Green handbag out of place
    rummaging for
    White, sharp-edged papers to sign
    with a Cold Blue Pen
Black shiny tape recorder
    blinking red light
Clashing colours intruding into this
   peaceful space.
Language jarring:
    Consent form
    Support person
    Interpreter
He aha?
Just tell me (lovely man)
Tell me your life!
You are so sick,
   so proud,
   so heartbreakingly alive
   (for now)
Sweet crumbs on my tongue, washed away with milky tea.
“What has happened to you since your diagnosis?”
“Ahhh, well it’s too late for me.
The doctor said, and the nurse too
I left it too late.
    You should have come to us when you got your cough.
    Now it’s too late.”
I want to cry “why? What stopped you?”
But that’s not why I’m here.
    Not The Research Question
Smiling, (he knows me now)
    he talks about the hidden subject
    anyway.
“Too tough for my own bloody good, I am.
    Driving a truck
    Supporting my whānau
I’m fine
Nothing but a cough
It’ll pass.
And I’m thinking

*Men don’t cry to the doctor.*

Besides

If something happens to me, then

Who would I be? (nothing, that’s who)

Who would look after them? (no-one. There’s no-one else. Only me.)

It’s all I know

being the man

the provider.

I’m real good at that, you know?”

* * *

“Are you getting care from hospice?”

“I am now, when they can find me!

But I was late for that, too! (laughs breathlessly)

You see, dear, you can’t leave tikanga at the door.

I see those places, and

I know.

Tikanga is a hanger-on there

something to do after the pills,

the sponge baths,

The dying.

I’m close to my God, Io Matua Kore, the One

so I know I have this sickness . . .

the pain

sent to me by Io

is my burden.

It’s also my pride.

I can bear this

I can make my whānau

my tūpuna

proud.

That place?

Hospice?

It’s the place I’ll go when I’m ready to

give up.

They’ll probably have to take me there in a bed

‘cos I’ll be leaving in a box (laughs and coughs)

That place isn’t for me.”
Tikanga.

I sit in the warm car

Thinking.

Conflicted.

I am a nurse; this is a tragedy.
Preventable with screening, education, early intervention.
Health literacy
Late access is

Never OK.

But . . .

I am a part of him now; this is *his* journey. *His* choice.

It has purpose
meaning
depth
identity
*Tikanga.*

3. People Like Me

There are no words that can epitomise
the betrayal of a health *care* system that doesn’t care.

People like me

write, talk, argue, *care*, shelter
futile, pushing shit uphill endlessly day after day without pause
burn out.

Professionals like me

dismiss, ignore, walk past, abandon
if you can’t beat them join them
settle.

Settlers shelter inside a health *care* system that is
staunch in its racism
proud in its absolutism
unwavering in its rightness, whiteness

Survivors find shelter outside the health *care* system that marginalises
patients, whānau, hapū, iwi

Survivors find strength in community
connections, aroha
Survivors survive.
People like me
  challenge, publish, Tweet
  listen to the kōrero of the disaffected, the hurt, the betrayed
  write poetry.

**Still working**

I have a huge struggle with writing conclusions; even using the word as a heading suggests that the work is completed. I am still writing, still researching, still working. I’m not done with shouting about inequities in our health care system, or crying with/for Māori who are disaffected, colonised, sick and dying. I hope that my poems have given colour to the black and white statistics about health inequities. I hope this part of my work reaches into your centre of emotions to create change for Māori. *Mā te wā*; until next time.

**References**


**Glossary**

Aroha: love
Aue: a lament, oh no!
Hapū: sub-tribe
He aha?: what’s this?
Iwi: tribe
Kai: food
Kare: term of endearment
Kōrero: talk, speech
Koro: old man (informal)
Moko: grandchildren (short for mokopuna)
Pepe: baby
Tane: man
Tikanga: customs and traditions, protocols
Tāpuna: ancestors
Wahine ma: women
Wahine toa: female warrior, strong woman
Whaea: mother, aunty
Whānau: family