Māori Model of Health: Te Whare Tapa Whā

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a well-known Māori model of health that has been used across a variety of sectors (i.e., health, education, justice). Te Whare Tapa Whā compares health to the four walls of a house where all four walls are necessary to ensure strength and symmetry (Durie, 1984). Te Whare Tapa Whā can be applied to any health issue (physical, spiritual, psychological or connections with family) affecting Māori. It is an influential model for describing concepts of health and wellbeing from a Māori perspective. The durability of this model, its simplicity and its wide application in health policy provide a starting point for both Māori and non-Māori to deliver culturally appropriate care for Māori. Whilst it is acknowledged that Māori are not a homogeneous group and are quite diverse with no single or typical Māori identity (Durie et al., 2001), this model can be adapted to all levels of identity.

- practitioners wanting to engage Māori need to consider how their own practice will reflect the concepts embedded within Te Whare Tapa Whā

Looking after all aspects of wellbeing, Te Whare Tapa Whā consists of taha wairua (spiritual), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional), taha tinana (physical) and taha whānau (family) considerations. Together, all four are necessary and in balance, represent ‘best health’. Each taha is also intertwined with the other. Accordingly, if any one of these components is deficient this will negatively impact on a person’s health (Durie & Kingi, 1997). The dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā are described below. In order to achieve the best outcomes for Māori, it is important that each component is recognised and addressed.

- for many practitioners who may be less knowledgeable about te taha wairua and te taha whānau (as compared to physical well-being), it will be important that they are inclusive of other Māori services and practitioners who can work alongside each other

Te taha wairua (spirituality)

Te taha wairua can be allikened to spiritual wellbeing. Durie (1998) refers to te taha wairua as the capacity for faith and wider communion. Te taha wairua has been identified as being the most essential requirement for health, but unfortunately has largely been ignored by health practitioners. Te taha wairua is not just about religion, although for many this is a very important part of their spirituality. It is believed that without a spiritual awareness, an individual can be considered to be lacking in well-being and more prone to ill health. Wairua may also explore relationships with the environment, between people, or with heritage. The breakdown of this relationship could be seen in terms of ill health or lack of personal identity.

- the challenge for many health practitioners is in knowing how to ask about this area in a meaningful manner. Participating in Māori cultural responsiveness training will assist with this learning

Te taha hinengaro (thoughts/feelings)

Te taha hinengaro refers to thoughts, feelings and behaviour which are vital to well-being. Durie (1998) refers to te taha hinengaro as the capacity to communicate, to think and to feel. Māori thinking can be described as being holistic. In many instances, understanding occurs less by dividing things into smaller and smaller parts. Māori do not think on an individual basis. The bigger picture retains the essence of the individual while addressing the needs of the whole.
Healthy thinking for many Māori is about relationships. Communication through emotions is important and more meaningful than the exchange of words and is valued just as much. For example, if Māori show what they feel, instead of talking about their feelings, this is regarded as healthy. An example of this can be observed by kuia at a tangihanga (funeral) where many typically express their sorrow through tangi (crying) rather than talking.

- in considering te taha hinengaro, practitioners need to be aware of the different cultural values and beliefs around health and the individual and whānau
- being respectful and open to these different beliefs and values will ensure meaningful engagement and connections can occur
- in considering chronic care conditions, practitioners may need to change the focus from individual management to whānau self-management

**Te taha tinana (physical)**

Te taha tinana refers to the capacity for physical health and development (Durie, 1998). The physical realm is the most familiar component within the health sector. However, for Māori physical well-being is intertwined with spiritual, emotional and family well-being. An example of the connection between te taha wairua and te taha tinana is how for Māori the body and things associated with it are tapu. The concept of tapu (meaning sacred) was the basis of law and order and health in traditional Māori society (Durie, 1977). The traditional Māori view was that illness was caused by a breach of tapu by the individual. Even today, concepts of tapu may be central to an understanding of illness for Māori.

Beliefs about tapu and physical well-being are another example of differences that may exist between Māori and non-Māori. For many Māori, certain parts of the body are also regarded as tapu, for example the head, and yet in many cases within the medical world these beliefs have been ignored.

Te taha tinana can also refer to the physical environment. Socio-economic factors such as employment, housing and income are other factors that affect the overall well-being of Māori.

**Te taha whānau (family/ connections)**

Te taha whānau refers to family well-being. The whānau is the prime support system providing care, not only physically but also culturally, spiritually and emotionally. For Māori, whānau is also about extended relationships rather than the western nuclear family concept. Maintaining family relationships is an important part of life and caring for young and old alike is paramount. Within all whānau there are roles and responsibilities. Everyone has a place and a role to fulfill within their own whānau. Families contribute to a person’s well-being, and most importantly a person’s identity. Interdependence with whānau rather than independence from whānau is the healthy goal for Māori. The boundaries between personal and family identity are often blurred (Durie, 1994). Involvement of whānau at times of illness is traditional (Durie, 1977), and should be recognised as such in the management of the whole client.

Whānau is recognised as the foundation of Māori society. As a principal source of strength, support, security and identity, whānau plays a central role in the wellbeing of Māori individually and collectively. “Under usual conditions it will be the client’s whānau who will normally create the
environmental conditions which will have the greatest impact on [a person’s health]” (Durie & Kingi, 1997).

- the challenge for practitioners will be in supporting the change from an individual focus to that of a whānau focus