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Rongoā Māori
(Traditional Māori healing)
through the eyes of Māori healers:
Sharing the Healing while
Keeping the Tapu

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the underlying philosophies of rongoā Māori, the traditional healing system of the indigenous Māori of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The research is set within the context of worldwide traditional healing systems that involves discussion of the embedded nature of indigenous cultural values and beliefs within traditional healing practices. Parallels are drawn between the traditional healing practices of Māori and other indigenous healing traditions.

The research was conducted in adherence to the principles of Kaupapa Māori research to ensure the use of Māori cultural values throughout the research process. Narrative interviews were conducted with seventeen Māori healers about their understandings of rongoā Māori. Data analysis was conducted in a three-step process using an approach created specifically for the research entitled the rourou Māori method of analysis. The analysis was inclusive of the contributions of each individual healer and the researcher to the collective story on rongoā Māori across all participants in the research.

The analysis revealed nine underlying philosophies of rongoā Māori. These showed that rongoā Māori: healing is a continuous process of life; is a co-construction of healing through the healer/client relationship; includes collaborative whakawhanaungatanga (family-like) relationships in healing; involves the synergy of the alliance between people and plants; utilises the tīpuna (ancestors) as the wairua (spirits) that conduct the healing; focuses on diagnosing illness through past generations; identifies the power of emotions to create or destroy health, illness and healing; aims to facilitate change for the client; and aspires to heal Māori of colonisation and keep Māori knowledge sovereign.

In this research, Māori healers indicated that aspects of Māori knowledge and wisdom have been purposely kept tapu (sacred). However, there are three major contributions to knowledge about traditional healing systems. First, new insights were presented on rongoā Māori, such as the relationship between healers and plants. Second, the contribution of rongoā Māori to the greater advancement of Māori tino rangatiratanga was discussed. Third, additional conceptualisations about traditional healing systems, such as aroha (love) in the relationship between the healer and client, were found. Rongoā Māori was shown to share several healing concepts with other traditional healing systems.

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