Estimating the public health risk associated with drinking water in New Zealand

A thesis presented
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Preamble

It always seems impossible until it’s done.

— Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918–2013)
This thesis is concerned with the application of both epidemiological and molecular tools to assess the drinking water safety in New Zealand. Compromised drinking water safety is commonly manifested as gastrointestinal illness. The studies in this thesis were motivated by the desire to find ways of reducing the burden of such illness in the human population. Although the studies were conducted in the New Zealand setting the methodologies can be readily applied elsewhere.

The first study investigated the factors associated with the presence of microbes in raw water intended for public consumption. Random forest, an established non-parametric statistical method, was used to model data with possible complex interactions and identified variables that were predictive of the presence of microbes in raw drinking water. *E. coli*, which is widely used as a microbial contamination indicator in the water industry, was found to be a better predictor of the presence/absence of *Campylobacter* (bacteria) than protozoan microbes (*Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*). This suggests that alternative methods of determining the presence/absence of pathogens in water should be developed. In the second study, the relationship between river flow and reports of cases of gastrointestinal illness was described using the distributed lag modelling approach. This revealed a positive relationship that peaked around 10 days after high flow. Further, the river flow-gastrointestinal illness relationship was stronger in small drinking distribution networks than in large ones. The small drinking water distribution networks could be targeted for facility upgrade in order to enhance their ability to deliver microbiologically safer drinking water.

The third study utilised culture-dependent methods to assess the public health risk associated with drinking water supplied at outdoor recreation facilities — campgrounds. Water treatment using methods such as ultra violet and chemical treatment were found to be highly beneficial for the campgrounds to deliver drinking water that was microbiologically safe and compliant with water safety regulations. The profiles and functional factors of drinking water microbial communities are described in the fourth study. Techniques from the fast-growing field of metagenomics were employed for this purpose. The capability of metagenomic techniques to detect multiple pathogens in a single assay was demonstrated. This has the potential to greatly enhance the specificity and sensitivity of microbial water quality testing.
Acknowledgements

I could not have accomplished the research work presented in this thesis without the excellent help and guidance that I received from my PhD supervisors. Thank you Nigel French for inviting me to carry out this research work and for teaching me a great deal of things about science. You always had a suggestion on how to move forward when faced with challenges. To Patrick Biggs, thank you for your kind and enthusiastic support even at short notice. You have been inspirational in my approach to bioinformatics and the presentation of genomic information. Thank you Mark Stevenson for your attention to detail and keeping me reminded of the need to apply the epidemiological principles appropriately in my work. To Deb Prattley, thank you for your unfailing support and kind guidance in presenting my research as a coherent story. To Paul Rainey, you provided that critical suggestion that got things moving again when the metagenomic DNA extraction was stalling, thank you.

Thank you to all my fellow postgraduate students at the Epicentre and Hopkirk Research Institute for being part of my journey and sharing your experiences with me along the way. To Christine Cunningham, Wendy Maharey, Jacque Mackenzie and Simon Verschaffelt, thank you for your administrative and computational support. Thank you to the mEpiLab team that provided me with the much needed laboratory support, in particular Angie Reynolds, Anthony Pita, Niluka Velathanthiri, Julie Collins-Emerson, Ann Midwinter, Neville Haack, Errol Kwan, Rhukshana Akhter, Lynn Rogers and Sarah Moore. Special thanks to the New Zealand Genomic Limited team, Lorraine Berry, Richard Fong and Trish McLenachan, for going beyond the call of duty to help me resolve the metagenomic sequencing issues.

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Most importantly, many thanks go to my family for being understanding and patient with me as I carried out this work. To my partner Eve, heartfelt thanks for making our home a warm and loving place to live. Completion of this work would have been extremely difficult
without your loving support. To Joe and Sam, thank you for letting your dad complete his PhD research trouble free. It has been a pleasure watching you blossom into fine young men during the four years of my PhD work, I love you very much.
Acronyms

**EpiLab** molecular epidemiology and public health laboratory. 47, 48, 50, 110, 112, 114, 116, 138, 165

aspa aspartase. 116

**glmA** glutamine synthetase. 116
**gltA** citrate synthase. 116

glyA serine hydroxy methyl transferase. 116

**pgm** phospho glucomutase. 116

**tkt** transketolase. 116

**uncA** adenosine triphosphate synthase alpha subunit. 116

**BLAST** basic local alignment search tool. 143, 161

**FLASH** fast length adjustment of short reads. 141, 143, 161

**MEGAN** metagenome analyzer. 143, 161

**PAUDA** protein alignment using a DNA aligner. 143, 161

QIIME quantitave insights into microbial ecology. 141, 161, 166

**AIC** Akaike information criterion. 86

**ATP** adenosine triphosphate. 8

**BIOM** biological observation matrix. 142

**BLUE** best linear unbiased estimator. 83

**CART** classification and regression trees. 53, 54

**CCA** canonical correspondence analysis. 79, 142, 145, 155, 156, 158

**DAF** dissolved air floatation. 20

**DAPI** 4′-6-diamidino-2-phenylindole. 51, 52

dATP deoxyadenosine triphosphate. 5, 25
dCTP deoxycytidine triphosphate. 5, 25
ddATP dideoxyadenosine triphosphate. 5, 6
ddCTP dideoxyctydine triphosphate. 5, 6
ddGTP dideoxyguanosine triphosphate. 6
ddNTP dideoxynucleotide triphosphate. 5, 6
ddTTP dideoxythymidine triphosphate. 6
dGTP deoxyguanosine triphosphate. 5, 25

**DLM** distributed lag model. 84–86

**DLNM** distributed lag non-linear model. 85–87, 94, 95, 100–104, 174–180


dNTP deoxyribonucleotide triphosphate. 5, 7, 8, 25

**DOC** Department of Conservation. 105–107, 121, 127–130, 137, 138, 155, 158, 159

dsDNA double stranded DNA. 6

dTTP deoxythymidine triphosphate. 5, 25

**DWSNZ** drinking water standards for New Zealand. 17, 28, 33, 41, 115, 120, 122, 128, 129, 160

**ELISA** enzyme-linked immunosorbet assay. 24–26, 42

emPCR emulsion polymerase chain reaction. 8

**ESR** Institute of Environmental Science and Research Limited. 17, 78

**ESRI** Environmental Systems Research Institute. 53, 108

**FC** faecal coliform. 34

**FISH** fluorescence in situ hybridisation. 25, 42

**GDH** glutamate dehydrogenase. 114

**GDP** gross domestic product. 105

**GLM** generalised linear model. 119, 120, 125, 127

**GLMM** generalised linear mixed model. 57, 58, 67, 68, 71, 73, 119, 120, 127, 128

**gp60** 60-kDa glycoprotein. 26

**GPS** global positioning system. 84, 107, 108, 110, 162, 163, 166

**HACCP** hazard analysis critical control point. 4

**HAdV** human adenovirus. 22

**HPyV** human polyomavirus. 22

**HSP** heat-shock protein. 35

**IMS** immunomagnetic separation. 51

**ISFET** ion-sensitive field-effect transistors. 8

**LAMP** loop-mediated isothermal amplification. 26, 42, 43

**LDA** linear discriminant analysis. 79

**LSU** large subunit. 34
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<td><strong>MANOVA</strong></td>
<td>multivariate analysis of variance. 79</td>
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<td><strong>MAV</strong></td>
<td>maximum acceptable value. 115, 120, 122</td>
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<td><strong>mCCDA</strong></td>
<td>modified charcoal ceferazone deoxycholate agar. 50, 51, 112, 164</td>
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<td><strong>MIE</strong></td>
<td>Ministry for the Environment. 1</td>
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<td><strong>MFT</strong></td>
<td>membrane filter technique. 23, 42</td>
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<td><strong>MLST</strong></td>
<td>multilocus sequence typing. 110, 115, 124, 128, 160, 194, 201</td>
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<td><strong>MoH</strong></td>
<td>Ministry of Health. 16, 17, 46, 78</td>
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<td><strong>MPN</strong></td>
<td>most probable number. 23, 33, 53, 60, 106, 116, 122</td>
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<td><strong>MST</strong></td>
<td>microbial source tracking. 29, 30, 42</td>
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<td><strong>MTF</strong></td>
<td>multiple-tube fermentation. 23, 42</td>
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<td><strong>NCBI</strong></td>
<td>National Center for Biotechnology Information. 143, 149, 156</td>
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<td><strong>NGS</strong></td>
<td>next-generation sequencing. 5, 11, 36, 140</td>
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<td><strong>NIWA</strong></td>
<td>National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research. 78, 165</td>
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<td><strong>NZGL</strong></td>
<td>New Zealand Genomics Limited. 138, 165</td>
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<td><strong>OD</strong></td>
<td>optical density. 138</td>
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<td><strong>OOB</strong></td>
<td>out-of-bag. 55</td>
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<td><strong>OTU</strong></td>
<td>operational taxonomic unit. 141, 142</td>
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<td><strong>PBS</strong></td>
<td>phosphate buffered saline. 51, 114, 198, 199</td>
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<td><strong>PCA</strong></td>
<td>principal component analysis. 46, 79, 80, 90, 94, 95</td>
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<td><strong>PCR</strong></td>
<td>polymerase chain reaction. 5, 9, 25, 26, 29, 35, 42, 51, 110, 112, 114, 115, 120, 122–124, 128, 139, 140, 156, 165, 167, 194</td>
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<td><strong>PSI</strong></td>
<td>proportional similarity index. 142, 143, 149, 155</td>
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<td><strong>QMRa</strong></td>
<td>quantitative microbiological risk assessment. 22</td>
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<td><strong>qPCR</strong></td>
<td>quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction. 22, 26, 43</td>
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<td><strong>RAM</strong></td>
<td>random-access memory. 166</td>
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<td><strong>rDNA</strong></td>
<td>ribosomal deoxyribonucleic acid. 34</td>
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<td><strong>REC</strong></td>
<td>river environment classification. 53</td>
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<td><strong>RF</strong></td>
<td>random forest. 46, 53–57, 65, 70–74</td>
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<td><strong>RNA</strong></td>
<td>ribonucleic acid. 25, 40, 138</td>
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<td><strong>rRNA</strong></td>
<td>ribosomal ribonucleic acid. 25, 26, 30, 34–37, 112, 136–140, 145, 155, 165</td>
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<td><strong>SMRT</strong></td>
<td>single molecule real-time. 9</td>
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<td><strong>ssDNA</strong></td>
<td>single stranded deoxyribonucleic acid. 5, 6, 9</td>
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<td><strong>SSU</strong></td>
<td>small subunit. 34</td>
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<td><strong>ST</strong></td>
<td>sequence type. 110, 112, 117, 124, 125</td>
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<td>shiga toxin-producing <em>E. coli</em>. 16, 72</td>
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<td><strong>TC</strong></td>
<td>total coliform. 34</td>
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<td><strong>UK</strong></td>
<td>United Kingdom. 37</td>
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<td><strong>USA</strong></td>
<td>United States of America. 16, 37, 45, 46, 75, 76</td>
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<td><strong>USEPA</strong></td>
<td>United States Environmental Protection Agency. 51, 114</td>
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<td><strong>UV</strong></td>
<td>ultra violet. 17, 21, 97, 120, 121, 127, 129, 130, 159</td>
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<td><strong>VTEC</strong></td>
<td>verocytotoxin-producing <em>E. coli</em>. 16, 72</td>
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<td><strong>WGS</strong></td>
<td>whole genome shotgun. 34, 136, 137, 139, 140, 143, 145, 149, 155, 157, 165, 166</td>
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<td><strong>WHO</strong></td>
<td>World Health Organization. 13, 15, 31, 41, 142, 149, 157</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>YLL</strong></td>
<td>years of life lost. 75</td>
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<td><strong>ZMW</strong></td>
<td>zero-mode waveguide. 9</td>
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