



Rongoā (Traditional Māori Healing)

“It is time for the Crown to stress the positive benefits of rongoā, particularly to combat the ongoing crisis in Māori health.”

– Ko Aotearoa Tēnei: Taumata Tuarua, Chapter 7

Ko Aotearoa Tēnei is the Waitangi Tribunal’s report into the claim known as Wai 262, which concerns the place of Māori culture, identity and traditional knowledge in contemporary New Zealand law, and government policy and practice.

Chapter 7 relates to rongoā Māori (traditional Māori healing). This factsheet provides a brief overview of that chapter.

Key points

Māori are facing a health crisis. Rongoā has significant potential to help address that crisis, because of its spiritual and biomedical qualities, and because of its potential to bring sick people into contact with the health system.

The Crown has suppressed rongoā in the past and currently fails to support it with the energy or urgency required by both the Treaty and the Māori health crisis.

What is rongoā and why is it important to Māori?

Rongoā is traditional Māori healing. It encompasses a way of understanding health that is based not only on the body but also on taha wairua (the spiritual dimension). It operates within a wider philosophical context in which people, places and events are seen as either tapu or noa. Breaches of tapu invite mental and physical consequences, such as disease. Tapu

and noa provided the basis for a sophisticated system of public health in pre-Treaty times.

In rongoā, then, tohunga or healers address both the physical symptoms and the metaphysical causes of any diminution of health or well-being. Rongoā thus encompasses karakia and ritenga (rituals and incantations), as well as physical forms of treatment such as mirimiri (massage) and traditional medicines based on plants such as mānuka (which has antibacterial properties), koromiko (used to treat diarrhoea and dysentery), and harakeke (which has antiseptic properties and soothes skin ailments).

The practice of rongoā and the knowledge and concepts that underpin it are vital aspects of Māori culture itself.

What the Treaty requires

The Treaty gives the Crown the right to govern, but in return it guarantees the tino rangatiratanga (full authority) of iwi and hapū in relation to their ‘taonga katoa’ (all that they treasure). The courts have characterised this exchange of rights and obligations as a partnership, and this is now a well-established Treaty principle.

In this context, the Treaty allows the Crown to put in place laws and policies to support and promote health. But in doing so the Crown must to the greatest extent practicable protect the authority of iwi and hapū in relation to their

taonga, including the practice of rongoā and the knowledge and concepts on which it is based.

However, even if rongoā was not the subject of Treaty rights, supporting it would be justified for its potential contribution to Māori health, as explained below.

What the Tribunal has found

The practice of rongoā was suppressed in New Zealand through the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 (which remained in force until 1962). This Act came into force during a Māori health crisis resulting from poverty, poor sanitation, and a lack of immunity to virulent infectious diseases. Instead of responding effectively to this crisis, the Act banned the activities of tohunga, and defined a core component of Māori culture as wrong and in need of 'suppression'. This was a breach of the Treaty.

The practice of rongoā has also been severely affected by environmental and social changes such as the clearing of bush, and urbanisation, which have cut Māori off from the sources of rongoā. In spite of these factors, rongoā has survived and traditional Māori healing continues to be practised today.

More recently, the Crown's attitude has shifted. In the 1990s, standards were put in place for traditional Māori healing. In the same decade, health funding agencies began to fund rongoā services, and contracts for these services expanded significantly after 2000, although explicit funding for ingested rongoā ceased in 2004 and rongoā still accounts for only a tiny proportion of all health funding. In 2003, the Ministry of Health's Māori health strategy recognised the value of Māori traditional healing, and in 2006 a rongoā development plan was published. In 2008, the Crown supported the establishment of a national rongoā body Te Paepae Matua mō te Rongoā.

Māori health is again in a state of crisis. Māori have significantly lower life expectancy, and much higher rates of infant mortality than non-Māori, and much higher rates of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, diabetes, asthma, meningococcal disease, schizophrenia, and many other illnesses.

Rongoā is not the only answer, but expanding rongoā services could be a significant step in improving Māori health. The medicinal properties of many rongoā remedies (such as mānuka and koromiko) are well established, and the spiritual dimension of rongoā is important for Māori well-being. Demand for rongoā appears to be growing, and expanded rongoā services could bring more unwell Māori into the primary healthcare system.

The Tribunal's view is that current support for rongoā, while an improvement on the past, has lacked urgency and remains inadequate and in breach of the Crown's Treaty obligations.

The Tribunal recommends that the Crown make urgent changes, including:

- recognising that rongoā has significant potential as a weapon in the fight to improve Māori health;
- identifying and implementing ways to encourage the health system to expand rongoā services (for example by requiring primary healthcare organisations servicing a significant Māori population to offer rongoā clinics);
- adequately supporting the national rongoā organisation Te Paepae Matua to play a quality-control role in relation to rongoā; and
- gathering data about the extent of current Māori use of rongoā services and likely ongoing demand.

The Tribunal also recommended that the Ministry of Health and the Department of Conservation coordinate rongoā policy, to ensure that rongoā plants survive and that tohunga can access them.

See *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei* chapter 7 for full details of the Tribunal's findings and recommendations.