

New findings show the impact of ancestry on health

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A 'one size fits all' approach to healthcare is being called into question by a researcher at Victoria University of Wellington, who says the immune systems of Māori and Pasifika people are very different from those with European ancestry.

Molecular geneticist Dr Geoff Chambers, who is an alumnus researcher at Victoria's School of Biological Sciences, says the findings are the latest to come out of a [research project](#) that has so far spanned 25 years.

Dr Chambers' earlier investigations identified genetic markers that traced the origin of Austronesian people (Polynesian, Māori, Melanesian, Micronesian and people from parts of South East Asia) back to Taiwan. His work also used molecular methods for forensic identification and as indicators for a range of diseases, including alcoholism and diabetes.

New data from his ongoing research shows that Māori and Pasifika people are genetically distinct from Europeans. "It goes some way to explaining why some [autoimmune diseases](#) that are relatively common in people of European descent—such as multiple sclerosis—are virtually unheard of among Māori and Pasifika," says Dr Chambers. "It also partly explains why diseases such as type-2 diabetes are more common in Māori or Pasifika people."

Dr Chambers says the findings highlight an existing inequity in medical treatment. "Medicine today is an increasingly genetic field of

knowledge," he says. "Many new drugs have been developed by Europeans for Europeans, but if we are to deliver these advances effectively to Māori and Pasifika people then we need new information, which we must uncover ourselves. This requires knowing something about their genetic make-up."

Dr Chambers says the research has implications for the public health system. "It's really important for organisations like the bone marrow registry to know that the [immune system](#) markers are different, in order to increase the number of matched donors and help improve the outcome of transplants.

"The important underlying message is that the research demonstrates very clearly that genes which are important in medical genetics have a whole different repertoire in Māori and Pasifika people than they do in Europeans—we need to take account of that to ensure we have equity in medicine."

Dr Chambers has recently been reporting back on his findings directly to Māori and Pasifika groups so that the information can be shared throughout the communities, and as a gesture of gratitude towards the original volunteer participants.

Provided by Victoria University

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