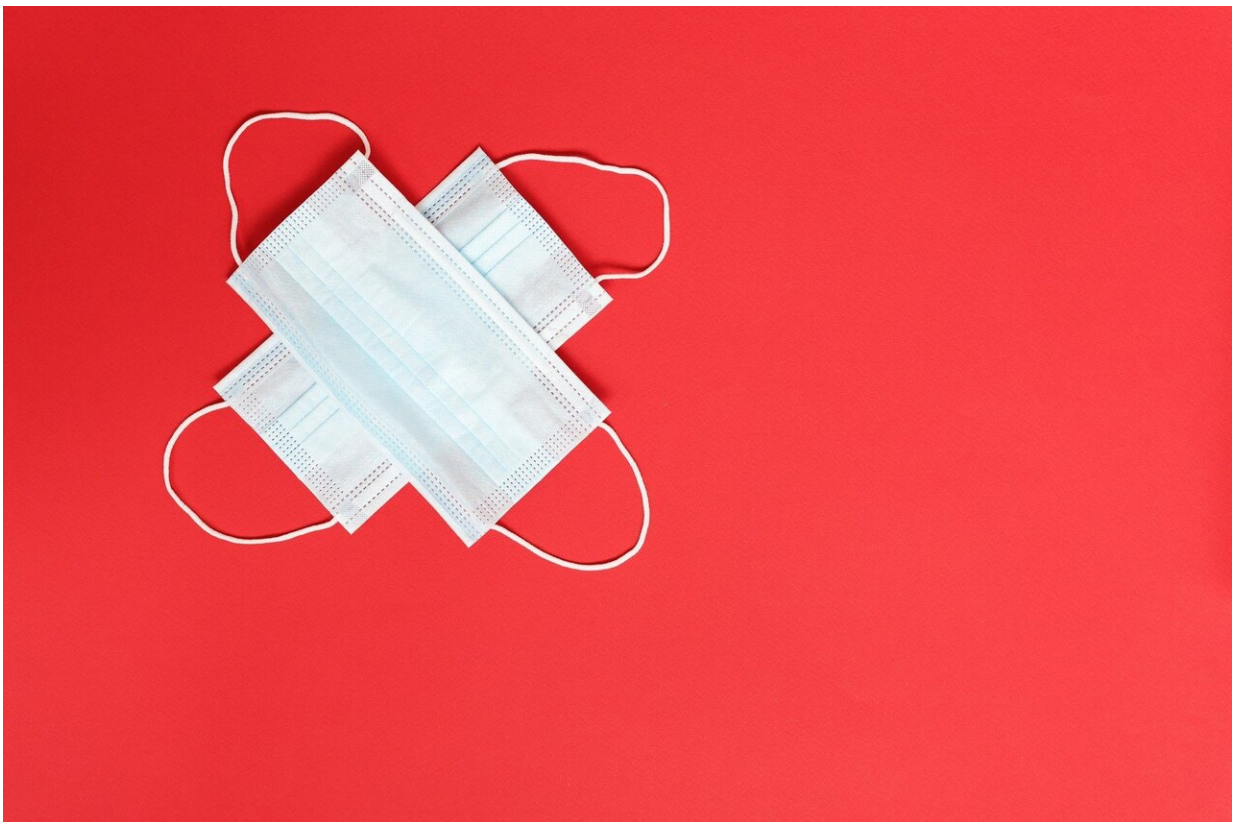


# Health and wellbeing of older New Zealanders must be a focus post-COVID: Otago researcher

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As older New Zealanders have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, an Otago researcher warns there needs to be an emphasis on

addressing older people's future needs and to help reduce aging inequities.

University of Otago scientist, Associate Professor Louise Parr-Brownlie, is also director of the Aging Well National Science Challenge, one of the country's 11 national science challenges.

She highlights the fact the pandemic has disproportionately affected older New Zealanders who have experienced the strictest social distancing guidelines along with significant suffering and impact—most of the 22 people dying as a result of COVID-19 in New Zealand are aged over 70 years.

"Somehow, media have portrayed our older citizens in a negative light, taking up hospital beds and emphasizing their vulnerability. This is harmful," Associate Professor Parr-Brownlie says.

"Most kaumātua (older people) have been stoic and resilient. They nonchalantly share that they have survived worse and they will get through this, as well. They weren't complaining about not getting takeaways, needing a fancy coffee or wanting to party with friends. They are getting on with life and things that really matter."

But as the number of older adults in New Zealand is expected to double in the next 20 years, the Otago scientist with a special interest in Parkinson's disease, advocates for continued funding for [quality research](#) among this age group to ensure culturally safe and [equitable care](#) for all older New Zealanders.

In recent research published in US journal *The Gerontologist*, Associate Professor Parr-Brownlie says currently research focused on older New Zealanders is fragmented and only partially addressed within other priorities such as noncommunicable diseases.

"A significant risk is that the research on the health and wellbeing of older New Zealanders could fall between priorities, leading in turn to uncoordinated, piece-meal health service delivery."

Despite publicly funded health and welfare support for older citizens, the aging experience differs markedly across ethnic groups with Māori dying seven years younger than other ethnicities.

The projected growth in the older New Zealand population (aged over 65) over the next 20 years is greater for Māori (130 percent), Pacific (120 percent) and Asian (190 percent) ethnicities than Pākehā (50 percent).

"These population changes have been projected for decades, yet, they are rarely discussed," Associate Professor Parr-Brownlie explains.

"For example, we need more residential care facilities. We need flexible and responsive policies that allow families to support and later care for, their older members in the way that they want it. One size rarely fits all."

Preliminary findings from a recent study funded by Aging Well found that New Zealand residents moving into retirement villages were older and frailer, in parallel, the aged residential care sector has dramatically changed since the Government's nationwide funding model was put in place more than 20 years ago.

"People are going into care at a later age, with multiple long-term conditions and disability-related dependencies that require specialized, around-the-clock care," Associate Professor Parr-Brownlie says.

"The number of older Māori and Pacific people living in retirement villages and aged residential care is disproportionately low—the majority of residents are currently of European descent. This disparity means

Māori and Pacific needs are underestimated and culturally appropriate services are limited and hard to access."

We must continue to advocate for changes to policies throughout health and wellbeing, socioeconomic, justice and education sectors to address the roots of aging inequities, she says.

"Once this is achieved, all older New Zealanders will receive culturally appropriate care in place, facilitating strengths-based positive aging."

**More information:** Louise C Parr-Brownlie et al. Aging in New Zealand: Ka haere ki te ao pakeketanga, *The Gerontologist* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnaa032](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa032)

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