

Debbie Dunsford

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One size did not fit all: Putting the Pacific into New Zealand's health system, 1950s-1990s

This paper explores the ways in which New Zealand's new settler Pacific peoples navigated the health system of their adopted country, and eventually claimed their own space within it. Until the 1990s, they tended to meet a one-size-fits-all system insensitive to differences of language and culture. Faced with difficulties of access and understanding at all levels from the general practitioner to the hospital specialist, Pacific people steered their way as best they could, drawing on the informal help of family, friends and Pacific people working in health. Although broad shifts in social, cultural and economic thinking from the late 1970s and 1980s brought greater diversity within the health system, it was Pacific health workers and professionals who first responded to those cultural needs informally, then spearheaded the development of formal services for and by Pacific people. Collectively, they created their own organisations to support and inform Pacific health workers and to lobby government on Pacific health issues. On an individual level, their diverse career pathways were based on the desire to tackle the needs they saw every day in their communities. The paper draws on interviews with Pacific health professionals for the University of Auckland project, 'Transnational health in the Pacific through the lens of TB'.

Keywords: New Zealand, Pacific, health, health system

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