Ignorance of Cook Islands traditional healing lore affects the health and well being of Cook Islanders

How many times have you, your family or close friends been stricken by an unknown illness which clears up in 24 hours or less and in cases where you are absolutely bedridden for days, you have to seek medical help. In many of the medical cases handled by your doctor, he/she has very little idea about what is affecting you apart from making a general diagnoses or observation and then adopting a prognosis that you have a flu-like condition that presents as, a rash, aches and pains or a sore throat. Depending on the illness or ailment being presented, in many cases they prescribe antibiotics, tablets or a topical cream of some sort, tell you to increase your fluid intake and then send you on your way, with both of you really none the wiser as to what was ailing you. The medical profession has to take some of the blame for this as they have conditioned you into the premise that if you visit a doctor, the outcome is that you will always be given medicine of some sort no matter what the ailment, and unfortunately that’s what we have come to expect. You have also been conditioned into going to the doctor for any imagined illness, even cuts and scratches that strikes you or your family because the knowledge you have about your body and its optimal well-being has been left in the hands of the medical profession. Look at all the advertising by the Ministry of Health here in the Cook Islands and you can appreciate that we are not in control of our health. We are told don’t do this, take this check-up or that check-up, watch for these danger health signs and all manner of advertising to make us aware of our frailty as human beings. Traditional healing lore that would have helped you manage some of your family’s minor ailments has been consigned to the history books and in effect you have lost control of the management of the health and well-being of yourself and your family and given this over to someone else, do you think this is right? What happens if there is no papa’a medical help at hand?

What about when you have a severe case of vomiting, diarrhoea, sweats or a massive headache, the diagnosis by your doctor generally follows the same line, such as, “it must be something you ate” or “it’s going round the community” or we have an “epidemic”. Did you know that in almost all cases any of those symptoms you present can actually be ascribed to a myriad of biological, physical and environmental causes, and unfortunately for your doctor are just guess work and not that scientific at all, but are in fact a professional medical guess (if there is such a thing). Even with the most modern of technical medical equipment and blood, fluid and biopsy samples, it all comes down to probabilities as to what is wrong with you, apart from diagnoses that are indisputable. The facts is that the initial face to face medical diagnosis methodology practised by your doctor with you the patient is essentially a hit and miss approach that cannot be verified by the scientific method, despite what you have been led to believe. In fact some of the approaches of the medical profession are more akin to medical healing lore i.e. faith and a belief in a value system that cannot be verified by the scientific method 100% of the time, yet it is taught in the school of medicine in a university. It’s roughly referred to as the ‘doctor’s bedside manner’.

The advantage of the scientific method is that it is unprejudiced. The result is always verifiable by anyone who follows the exact same methodology. The end result will hold true irrespective of who is involved or will be affected. No matter what the religious conviction or the state of the doctor at that time or the state of the patient, this will not affect the scientific methods results or outcome. Think how many times someone you know has had an unfavourable medical diagnosis and on a second medical opinion the diagnoses was incorrect. This is the flaw as well as a check and balance in the medical professions approach to illness management, because a medical opinion is at best a professional medical guess given what the patient is presenting with and the provision of any background information that may assist your doctor to arrive at a prognosis for treatment. It takes skill in teasing out information to allow the doctor to make an informed assessment, however in this day and age of long hospital waiting lists and appointment queues, they are very very busy, only human and they make the diagnosis within moments of you presenting symptoms of an ailment or illness and therein lays the non-scientific method.

The basis of a scientific method relies on predicting a result from a theory or hypothesis such that the result or outcome is true or false 100% of the time. Like one of Isaac Newton’s fundamental laws of physics, to ‘every action there is an opposite and equal reaction’. This observation is indisputable and observable time and time again. Push against something and it pushes back at you with the same force. This experiment can be predicted, observed, confirmed and repeated 100% of the time by anyone. A medical diagnoses on a person presenting with flu-like symptoms on the other hand, cannot be predicted as being accurate or verifiable all of the time, nor can it be repeated or verified all of the time, therefore on that basis it is not a scientific method in the true sense of the word and is more akin to faith and belief in a value system called medical lore. Yet the whole medical profession absolutely believes in this approach, so do governments and so does the general population and herein lays the issue. If medical lore is not a truly scientific method and is given such credence by the medical profession and the general population, how is it that they can also in the same breath cast aspersion on indigenous peoples traditional healing lore, having basically the same approach and using the language of healing lore to develop a treatment regime?

In a nutshell it is an historical role reversal in which for thousands of years traditional healing methods or lore for dealing with illness were treated through traditional knowledge of oils, fragrances, herbs, powders, tinctures, salves and medicinal plants. In addition massage and traditional trauma techniques were some of the established means for treating the sick, ill, ailing and poorly people. Admittedly there were charlatans and cranks who preyed on the ignorant or the desperate and who sold potions, pills and all manner of contraptions, devices and concoctions purporting to cure all sorts of ailments. This changed over the centuries as the medical quacks as they were called in those days became more prominent, more plausible, and more knowledgeable of human physiology and anatomy and people became more civilised and socialised into villages, towns and cities. The rule of government, the rise of powerful medical lobby groups and legislation to marginalise traditional medical lore arose (in NZ the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907), advances in specialist medical education (medical university), the introduction of scientifically trained people (doctors, surgeons, GP’s), new drugs and medical inventions (X-ray, MRI, EEG), new scientific equipment (scalpels, sutures, autoclave), cleanliness (soap, washing hands, disinfectants) and hygienic practices all contributed to pushing traditional
healing into the background and the medical profession into the foreground. Till we now find ourselves in modern times, with traditional healing that has a back seat and does not figure very highly on modern day medical intervention strategies, this is especially true in the Cook Islands. If traditional healing is used, it is used when the patient is in terminal decline, far too late to arrest and reverse the illness or ailment. We all have iti tangata who have resorted to traditional healing remedies, but far too late, as their headstones will attest.

In the time of our tupuna, healing lore in indigenous communities was in the hands of skilled traditional healers erroneously called witch doctors or shaman by European anthropologists with very little understanding of cultural and traditional dynamics. They observed, noted, recorded, interviewed and interpreted what they saw using some of the social science languages of anthropology, psychology, archaeology or sociology as their medium of communication and then publishing their findings in learned papa'a academic circles and thereby becoming the so called 'expert' in the study of 'us' noble savages and usually earning an advanced degree or doctorate in this field of study and if they were especially clever a professorship at a prestigious university. I don’t presume to denigrate what those anthropologists did, because in some small way they highlighted our culture in the written word albeit from their perspective, they also delved into areas that were usually kept hidden or secret such as genealogy, which they then published. This gave following generations the ability to discover their family linkages but also ensured that those family linkages were able to be used in a court of law in land disputes and inheritance. The written genealogy also highlighted what people wanted to hide, such as skeletons in the cupboard of people and or misdeeds.

In the pacific islands our traditional healers were called, depending on which pacific island you came from, tohunga, taunga, kahuna and other indigenous healer names and were literally skilled healers and specialists in the field of village health and well-being covering the biological, physical, spiritual and mental states of the village community. They descended from such specialists or as children were observed as having the requisite mana to become a tribal or village specialist and they were then selected and schooled in the university of traditional knowledge, along with other children who would become the specialists in other aspects of village and tribal life such as warriors, hunter gatherers, fishers, orators, navigators, carvers, tattooists, keepers of the genealogy and builders.

To say that we were not a civilised people is pretty rich considering what was happening to white people on the other side of the globe in England and Europe in those days. The religious persecution of so called civilised Europe is a case in point where people were killed for their beliefs or persecuted by the church in the name of god and they talk about us being the savages. The thousands of years of Polynesian lore meant that we were eminently suited to surviving and prospering in an environment we were in tune with. We didn’t have a science as it is understood by Europeans, what we had was an absolute belief system of lore and an intimate knowledge of our environment and our place within it. We based this lore on observation and use and gave our own names to describe what happened within this environment, which were interpreted by these anthropologists and Christian missionaries as pagan worship, religious ceremony, demon worshiping or animism, rather than seeing our culture for what it was, a way of life and living within the means of our environment.

I’m not going to say that living in this cultural environment was all a bed of roses, far from it; the point is without lore to govern how we lived and interacted, there was no law.

Remember I opened this article about being struck by an unknown illness and proceeded to give you an introduction and a historical perspective of the papa’a medical professions approach to illness management. In this part of the article I offer an alternative view as to why we get sick or ill based on our ignorance of Cook Islands traditional healing lore and preventative health strategy’s.

Hands up all you Cook Islanders who at one time have sat their bums on a table or left a hat on the kitchen bench or put their feet up on the table or changed their baby's soiled nappies on that same table or mixed their undergarments, teatowels, towels and dirty socks in the same laundry wash. Of those who have their hands up, how many of you have observed this happening throughout your life. I suspect that this is most of you. OK put your hands down, well I can tell you that this is a breach of healing lore and if you didn’t know it, come along for a journey of enlightenment. Let me explain: as humans we share this planet with uncountable numbers of microscopic creatures called bacteria, you know the kind, our skin and our internals especially stomach and intestines are home to billions of bacteria and for the most part they and we live in harmony and like all organic creatures we have to regularly void bodily wastes to prevent the build up of toxic and harmful waste. This bodily waste contains billions of microscopic bacteria some benign and some malign.

This next part is not for those who are squeamish about personal bodily functions. However you need to get a perspective of what I am discussing. Your body tells you that you need to go to the bathroom. So you go to the toilet and have a kaka and wipe your bum, pull your undergarment and outer clothing back on and hopefully you have washed your hands and then you go sit on the table or kitchen bench while someone is preparing a meal. I don't care who you are unless you use a bidet or immediately shower after having a kaka and fastidiously clean your nether region, there is always the probability of leakage through your pants or undergarments onto the table, and in fact it is almost guaranteed that there is leakage, however miniscule. Remember a pin prick size of faecal matter harbours millions of bacteria and you get the size of the issue. You leave the table or bench; a member of your family comes to the table with food and places their hand where you just sat. Faecal matter and or bacterial matter is transferred to their fingers, then to their food then to their mouth, bingo, the likelihood of a bacterial infection is almost guaranteed to occur, especially an infection such as hepatitis A. Upset stomach, diarrhoea, vomiting, you get the picture and for want of a better explanation sometimes labelled as food poisoning.

For the healthy person a slight fever or headache is the only symptom, for the elderly or ailing or invalid the outcome could well be hospitalisation or death. All because you or someone else sat their bum where they shouldn't have and you did nothing about it. I notice this everywhere I go, Cook Islanders and papa’a absolutely ignorant of what they are doing, sitting on a park bench table or their children standing and running on the table after walking in the park where dogs have been running around, marking their territory, having a mimi and defecating and the kids walking through the mess and walking on tables where people go to eat. You have to remember that our children are dirty little grubs when it comes to hygiene and have to be socialised and trained into good clean habits. The same goes for hats and caps.
on tables, hair can and does harbour nits, the eggs fall onto the table from the caps and hats, you place your hand where the cap was, because of our black and long hair, we brush our hands through and transfer nit eggs onto your scalp, there comes the next kutu outbreak.

Feet on tables is definitely a no go zone, spores from tinea and other fungal bacteria between your toes is not a good sight, the spores transferring to the table, our hands pick up the spores and transfer them to a nice growing medium which is your mouth and a sore throat or a fungal infection occurs and we have no idea where it came from and usually it is a mild outbreak. We kiss our partners or our children and pass the infection on and soon we have everyone sharing the love. As we wear jandals and bare feet we walk through all kinds of animal waste on the ground and transfer this to our tables, our eating areas, our bedding and if we follow poor hygiene then we become ill without knowing the cause. That also goes for changing baby on the table or kitchen bench, this is a recipe for cross infection, from the baby’s body fluids and soiled napkins rolled up and sitting on the table or bench just before we prepare the kaikai. Not to mention the fact that baby’s hands are flailing all over the place and come into contact with the table or bench where those soiled napkins are or have been and they suck on their fingers. Laundry is a place where washing all those different types of clothing together exposes you and your family to outbreaks of infection because most bacterial pathogens are not killed by washing and then drying the laundry in the sun. Laundry here is mainly cold wash laundry powder and mixing soiled clothing with your teatowels means your kitchen can be a bacterial nightmare as those same teatowels are used on the dishes and utensils and sometimes just before we eat. If you have a cat if they are not trained to stay off the bench top where you prepare food, their paws are the biggest collectors of faecal material and bacterial pathogens. You’ll notice because they leave paw prints all over the bench or table.

This is just an introduction into some of the traditional healing lore of our ancestors that deals with health, well-being and hygiene that the majority of local modern Cook Islanders and papa’a are blissfully unaware of. You go into their homes and see them breaking traditional healing lore time and again with no understanding or idea why they and their families are getting sick. NZ Maori brought up in tikanga Maori know that the scenarios I have just described are areas where you are liable to get a good growling and a telling off for breaching tapu. In this case tapu is not about sacredness, it is about being given a warning that there are serious consequences for breaking lore and the result is a mild fever, illness or in extreme cases death. Funnily enough those children of Cook Islands descent brought up on tikanga maori in Aotearoa are very aware of health and well-being and tapu from a NZ Maori perspective and wonder why it is not taken as seriously as it should be in the Cook Islands especially when they come back and visit their iti tangata and see lore being broken every day. You have to wonder how this came about and how we as Cook Islanders have regressed in our knowledge or the practices of traditional healing.

You can now appreciate that medical science does not have all the answers, and the training given to medical students is biased in favour of a scientific approach and the application of medical lore through the doctor’s bedside manner to provide a diagnosis for the treatment of illness. It’s incredible really that this approach is given such credibility when in fact it should be seen as one of a number of medical interventions one of which includes traditional knowledge that are applied in treating illness or ailments. The medical profession is also not to blame for our reliance on western medical management, we and it’s not just Cook Islanders, have allowed our traditional healing lore to regress and have given away our own belief systems and adopted the papa’a one and guess what we only have ourselves to blame for allowing this to happen. The role reversal has the medical profession with the upper hand over traditional healing lore which is a pity really as they actually parallel and complement each other albeit from differing perspectives.

Unfortunately we are at a cross roads in our culture and if we take the right branch of the road and continue to follow the papa’a way of doing things to the exclusion of our lore, we will become the lost generation of Cook Islanders, strangers to our lore in our own land. Totally reliant on medical intervention and papa’a ways of healing we have become papa’a medical welfare beneficiaries when the solution is in our hands. However if we take the left branch of the road which is a journey fraught with challenges especially from our own people, entrenched papa’a trained health professionals and a government that gives very little credence to