

# Experiences of Māori veterinarians and veterinary nurses in Aotearoa

Jane Jones, Francesca Brown, Scott Klenner

In the veterinary sector 2% veterinary graduates (Jillings *et al.* 2021) and based on polytechnic enrolment data it is estimated that 10% of allied veterinary professional graduates identify as Māori, although it is unknown what percentage of those enter and remain in practice. This does not yet reflect New Zealand society, which currently has 17.4% (2022) Māori and is predicted to continue to grow to around 30% by 2040. Diversity in professions to reflect the makeup of society is shown to be beneficial to both the profession and to society (Coffman 2002, Curtis *et al.* 2015, Steven *et al.* 2016).

Māori voices in the veterinary sector also appear to be absent. Increasing the visibility and stories of Māori in the veterinary profession is likely to be beneficial in supporting developing a profession that is culturally safe and culturally diverse.

This research is aimed to bring voices of Māori veterinary professionals forward through narrative research, seeking to understand what attracted the participants to enter the veterinary sector and then explore cultural safety and inclusion in the veterinary sector from the participants' perspectives. This research has been approved by the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee Approval number 994.

The principal researchers are conscious that this research is being carried out by Pākehā and is therefore not kaupapa Māori research. Throughout the process the project has been supported by a Māori researcher. Additionally, all themes and quotes are being sent back to the participants to confirm the researchers' interpretation, as a way of upholding the mana of the participants and reducing the risk of Pākehā researchers slipping into the use of a colonial lens. This co-design approach increases the validity of the findings.

Jane Jones interviewed thirteen participants (seven veterinarians and six veterinary nurses) in 2022 and 2023. Snowballing was used as the method of sourcing participants. The reason for this is because it is a small community and in addition, there was a need for participants to be able to trust the researchers undertaking this work. Word of mouth from the early participants thus supported later participants coming forward. The participants all expressed appreciation that that work was being undertaken and an interest in seeing where it was going to go.

The interviews were semi structured, aiming to give participants enough scope to share their stories freely. The broad questions were sent to the participants ahead of the interviews. These were:

1. Tell me about your journey/haerenga into the veterinary profession.
2. In Aotearoa New Zealand the relationship with Te Tiriti o Waitangi is very important in education. What is it like in the vet world?
3. In terms of culture:
  - a. Do you think people feel culturally safe in the veterinary sector?
  - b. What are your stories or observations that inform your thoughts?
  - c. What do you think the opportunities are for the veterinary sector?
4. What observations or stories do you have regarding the experiences of Māori clients you have observed in the veterinary sector?

The participants were all drawn to the profession in the same way New Zealand Europeans are known to be drawn to the sector – through an affinity with animals and exposure to them through their childhood. The journeys to entering formal education for the professions were not always straightforward and, in many cases, not encouraged or supported by the people around them.

Most of the Māori veterinarian participants entered the profession following a Pākehā upbringing, and for some this upbringing meant little or no connection with their Māori whakapapa until later in life. They reflected in the interviews the absence of cultural diversity and cultural practice right from veterinary school. This included the absence of Māori indigenous knowledge, frameworks, language, or validation reflecting a mono-cultural approach to veterinary education. This potentially leads to the assumption that Māori knowledge systems are irrelevant to veterinary care in New Zealand. This may have contributed to why most participants struggled to come up with an example of what Te Tiriti o Waitangi looks like in the veterinary profession.

Two of the veterinarians have left veterinary practice and now work in a sector where they felt they could do more for their communities. For those veterinarians still in practice nearly all identified that they are working with intention to re-connect with their culture, ensuring they are contributing to their Māori whānau, hapū and iwi and the wider Māori world. More of the veterinary nurses had grown up in a Māori world but they noted that this was not reflected in their chosen profession. They were able to articulate through their eyes the experiences that they observe Māori clients having and the benefits of having a Māori veterinary nurse to help connect in difficult situations and deescalate potentially difficult situations.

Both groups almost universally commented on the lack of Māori faces and a desire to meet other Māori veterinarians and veterinary nurses. What was also of note is when they were asked about what honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi meant in the veterinary sector the participants all found this hard to answer and some participants expressed a desire to brainstorm on this with other Māori vets and vet nurses.

The participants have largely felt safe and welcomed by the veterinary profession itself and they mostly hadn't experienced overt racism, but they could see and feel it around them. They did note times of discomfort and commented that farming clients (more so than clients with companion animals) can put them in a situation of feeling uncomfortable and at times distressed through the things they say. The examples the participants shared showed evidence of bias and judgment from the clients and at times, team members. Participants also haven't been empowered or encouraged to turn up as 'Māori' at work. For those veterinarians who participated in this research and who made deliberate decisions, to leave the profession, it is possible to argue that these decisions were made to work for organisations where they can contribute to their communities in a manner more congruent with their values.

Participants also shared stories where they felt that Māori companion animal clients could have had better experiences. There is an apparent lack of understanding and knowledge about historical injustices and this lack of understanding may lead to judgement of clients by staff which is damaging to Māori staff and clients. Reducing judgment and paying better attention to getting to know the client, tikanga and understanding indigenous models of health would better support these clients. They also expressed that there is a need to examine the privatised model we operate in to be more inclusive and enabling of access to animal healthcare to underserved communities. The Euro model of relationship centred care (Suchman 1993) also applies and would support veterinary staff getting to know a client and working with them with unconditional positive regard (Englar 2017).

These stories shed light on experiences of the sector through a Māori lens and the opportunities for the sector to support the provision of a culturally safe environment for Māori already in the profession and for Māori clients, as well as increasing its attractiveness as a career path for Māori. It also provides opportunities for the education sector to support this. The opportunities identified by the participants include visibility of Te Reo Māori and a focus on correct pronunciation, attention to tikanga and a need to be more inclusive of indigenous models of health. The education sector is already taking steps to address this in their curriculum. There remains a need and an opportunity to support the existing profession in learning about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Te Ao Māori and its relevance to and benefits for the veterinary profession and examining the model of animal healthcare and the opportunities to make it more inclusive to underserved communities.

The analysis of the narratives is still underway, and peer reviewed publications will follow. Further research is proposed to run a wānanga with the participants to explore further some of the themes in this research and propose a framework for the profession to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

## References

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