

COVID-19 survivor encourages Pacific peoples to join study

Samoan COVID-19 survivor Tuala Tagaloa Tusani describes his experiences with the coronavirus as scary, painful and leaving him feeling perilously close to death. The 44-year old Samoan entrepreneur contracted the Delta variant of COVID-19 in September 2021 and spent four days in Middlemore Hospital and eight days in Auckland Hospital.

“For five days straight, I couldn’t sleep, the pain was so sore,” recalls Tuala. “My fever reached 40°C and I caught pneumonia. When an islander goes to hospital we don’t think we’re coming out, we go there to die. I was close to giving up in hospital.”

Tuala’s story made front page news last year because of the delays in him and his partner being able to access medical assistance. After testing positive for COVID-19, they were sent to an MIQ hotel to isolate, but when things took a turn for the worse, they were unable to raise an ambulance to get to a hospital.

Severe body aches, vomiting, incontinence and body temperatures of 42.7°C weren’t enough to convince the MIQ managers to call an ambulance. They recommended the couple take panadol instead. Knowing things were dire, Tuala made the 111 call himself.

“It took five hours for an ambulance to pick me up and another six hours for my partner to get picked up,” says Tuala. “When she got to the hospital she collapsed.”

Pacific peoples represent 29 percent of COVID-19 cases in Aotearoa and 34 percent of all hospitalised cases. But the stories of how they’ve been affected are largely unheard. Tuala is hoping to change that by encouraging more Pacific peoples to support the “Impacts of COVID-19 in Aotearoa—Ngā Kawekawe o Mate Korona” study, and share their insights, both good and bad.

“A lot of people are whakamā (embarrassed), like it was a degrading disease whereas for me I don’t see it like that,” says Tuala. “Our experiences could be of benefit, not just to Pacific peoples, but Kiwis in general. One of the scariest things was I got calls from family members who went through what I went through, but were too scared to reach out for help. We shouldn’t be suffering in silence.”

Tuala knows the virus isn’t going away anytime soon and he’s hoping New Zealand’s health services will learn from the experiences of COVID-19 survivors like him.

“My concern is when these hospitals fill up and our people are forced to isolate at home, we are going to be in trouble. That’s why I want to share my experience, to try to motivate others to get vaccinated.

“Not only that, it’s our duty and our responsibility to help our fellow neighbour. We are blessed to have survived it, why wouldn’t we want to share information? If it saves one person, it’s worth it knowing what we’ve been through.”

About the study

The “Impacts of COVID-19 in Aotearoa—Ngā Kawekawe o Mate Korona” study aims to understand the experiences of people who have had COVID-19. Researchers want to know about the impact COVID-19 has had on the health and well-being of these individuals and their whānau.

If you're aged 16 and over, and had COVID-19 before 1 December 2021, you're invited to take part in the study by completing the surveys at <https://covid.aotearoa.com>. Alternatively, you can call **0800 800 581** or email covid.aotearoa@vuw.ac.nz.

The study is led by Dr Lynne Russell (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne, Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Porou) and Dr Mona Jeffreys at Te Hikuwai Rangahau Hauora—Health Services Research Centre at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington.

They head-up a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, primarily from Te Hikuwai Rangahau Hauora—Health Services Research Centre. Dr Marianna Churchward (Lotofaga, Faleasiu, Samoa) leads the Pacific arm of the research.

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