

Cancer Trials New Zealand Symposium, 22 September 2022

Future-proofing clinical cancer research in New Zealand at a time of major systems change: A summary



Introduction

July 1st 2022 marked the beginning of a new national health system with the creation of Te Whatu Ora (Health NZ) and Te Aka Whai Ora (Māori Health Authority) with an aim to create a more equitable, accessible, cohesive and people-centred system to improve the health and wellbeing of all New Zealanders. Importantly there is emphasis on ensuring the health system works well for Māori and reduces health inequities for Māori.

Our symposium offered the opportunity to hear from **Dr Nisha Nair** (Te Aho o Te Kahu), **Dr Myra Ruka** (Hei Āhuru Mōwai), **Professor Cris Print** (Professor in Molecular Medicine and Pathology, University of Auckland) and **Dr Ian Town** (Manatū Hauora). Each speaker discussed the future of clinical cancer research in Aotearoa New Zealand, potential opportunities with the new health system structure and the importance of a collaborative approach.

Dr Nisha Nair, Te Aho o Te Kahu

Supporting improved access to cancer clinical trials

Te Aho o Te Kahu provides national leadership for cancer control in Aotearoa and helps to lead and co-ordinate the efforts of many to deliver better cancer outcomes with an equity focus. They are an independent stand-alone department that collaborates with central government partners, as well as many leadership groups, clinical advisory groups and working groups.

Te Aho o Te Kahu has recognised the importance of clinical trials in cancer control and have supported the work of Manatū Hauora in developing equitable clinical trials infrastructure and ensuring that clinical trial participation is a Quality Improvement Indicator in selected cancers. They have also provided funding support towards the development of core infrastructure to support teletrials in Aotearoa, with an aim of reducing inequitable access to clinical trials and increasing the chance of participation for patients living outside major centres.

Te Aho o Te Kahu is building a future cancer information sharing platform called 'CanShare' that aims to allow the timely sharing of relevant and accurate cancer data (including from registries) to support clinical and patient decision making, as well as identifying potential participants for future clinical trials.

Dr Myra Ruka, Hei Āhuru Mōwai

Key research priorities for Hei Āhuru Mōwai and Cancer Trials Aotearoa

Hei Āhuru Mōwai is motivated to embed Rangatiratanga into cancer control, eliminate cancer inequities between Māori and non-Māori, and maximise hauora gains for whānau Māori. They do this by 1) advocating for better cancer outcomes for whānau Māori; 2) provide Māori cancer expertise; 3)

foster connections and collaborations for cancer kamahi Māori; and 4) Influence research to deliver better cancer outcomes for whānau Māori.

Research priorities for Hei Āhuru Mōwai include key Te Tiriti Partnerships (for example Te Aho o Te Kahu and the Cancer Society), Māori led research, data sovereignty, health research with a focus on Māori health gain, workforce development and access to clinical trials.

Hei Āhuru Mōwai collaborated with Cancer Trials New Zealand on the development of their Strategic Plan 2021 to 2026, with both organisations aiming to influence cancer research towards maximising Māori health gains and Māori research development.

Professor Cris Print, Professor in Molecular Medicine and Pathology, University of Auckland

The challenges of precision oncology data

Precision oncology data is a unique type of patient data that is rapidly growing in complexity and impact. Precision oncology data is used both for the clinical care of current patients and for research to improve the care of future patients.

The challenges of precision oncology data are: storing and using large-scale precision oncology data, linked to clinical data, in a way that is safe, secure and effective, reaches toward health equity, is co-governed with Māori, and respects Māori data sovereignty. The Rakeiora initiative is co-developed and co-governed with Māori and is an action learning program to advise Aotearoa New Zealand on the infrastructure required to meet the challenges of genomic data complexity, volume and equity.

Precision oncology data and the associated technologies have the capacity to mitigate cancer outcome inequities in Aotearoa New Zealand providing there is a national strategy, is equity-led, has national funding, collaboration and co-governance with Māori. Future considerations include the need to identify potential partnerships and funding sources, with potential collaboration from a wide range of sectors.

Dr Ian Town, Manatū Hauora

The role of health research in the New Zealand Health System

Aotearoa New Zealand is currently not only operating under the new national health system but also a different legal framework with the Pae Ora Act 2022 which sets out ambitions for the health system. There are a number of national strategies which are currently being formulated or revised and include the New Zealand Health Plan, the New Zealand Health Strategy and Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways Green Paper, which is a wider review of the science system.

Research in the new health system is a shared responsibility of Manatū Hauora to set the strategic direction, with co-governance from Te Aka Whai Ora, and Te Whatu Ora as the lead operational entity for conducting research in partnership with providers and communities. The Health Research Council (HRC) is the lead funder of research and workforce capability and capacity. Manatū Hauora has created an Evidence Research and Innovation Directorate that confirms the signals of an increasing emphasis on evidence, research and innovation across the health system.

In 2020, Manatū Hauora and the HRC commissioned research to provide evidence-based infrastructure recommendations towards building a national, equitable and sustainable clinical trials system in Aotearoa New Zealand. This project has recently been completed and the report submitted. The areas of focus were data infrastructure, data systems, equity and workforce capability. The key findings led to criteria for a preferred option, and the elements of a future clinical trials infrastructure

that were deemed critical. The top features of a national, equitable clinical trials infrastructure included: being based on Te Tiriti principles, co-governed with Māori, research leadership and accountability embedded within the health system, national clinical trials infrastructure centre, regional clinical trial co-ordinating centres, national federated health data system with Māori data governance at the core, sustainable systematic networks for Māori and Pacific researchers, and inclusion of consumer research partners in all publicly funded clinical trials. This clinical trials system will require significant investment in infrastructure, investment in implementation and ongoing operational costs and the development of a research culture within the health system.

Conclusion

The presentations and subsequent panel discussion highlighted the challenges, opportunities and the progress to date in the field of clinical cancer research in New Zealand. We have an inadequately resourced network of cancer trials sites and a coordinating centre (Cancer Trials New Zealand) which have been engaged in providing access to cancer research studies for patients without a clear mandate from the health service.

Cancer is at the cutting edge of genomic medicine with its heavy dependence on the cancer genome enabling personalised medicine. The accompanying data quality, storage and sovereignty are new challenges for clinical research. The “pathfinder” Rakeiora initiative is co-developing with Māori a scalable infrastructure for genomic data. Integrating clinical trials infrastructure with such a genomics infrastructure will ensure Aotearoa New Zealand is at the forefront of research-informed cancer care.

The new health reforms and the development of Te Whatu Ora and Te Aka Whai Ora come with a directive for research to be included as a component of core business. In addition the new Manatū Hauora division of Evidence, Innovation and Research will provide leadership in this regard including a refresh of the New Zealand Health Research Strategy.

The commissioned work on developing a model for investment in clinical trials infrastructure is being discussed at ministerial level within health and science portfolios. Publication of this high level proposal will hopefully lead to a national framework on which to base a sustainable clinical trials research.

Within these sector-wide developments in clinical research is clinical cancer research with an equity focus which is being championed by Te Aho o Te Kahu with Hei Āhuru Mōwai, supported by health sector cancer trials units and the Cancer Trials New Zealand network.