

Media release
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Waka Ama provides answers for Maori health

Canoes and paddles are being thrown into the mix in a unique Maori health initiative in Northland. The Northland District Health Board (NDHB) is using Waka Ama to access remote communities and deliver important health messages to Maori in the area.

"We're basically establishing Waka Ama crews in Northland communities and using this network to promote healthy living amongst our people," health educator Clayton Wikaira said at the Public Health Association's annual conference today.

"We started with one community and one waka eight years ago and have now spawned 14 teams in communities around Northland. The sport has universal appeal and attracts a whole range of community members. Our people can be very sedentary so we need to attract them into physical exercise."

Apart from the very obvious health and fitness gains of Waka Ama, the crews have become part of NDHB's community network.

"Because they are already focusing on health and fitness, the groups are much more receptive to other health messages. Things like smokefree lifestyles and healthy eating make sense in the setting," Clayton said.

NDHB's role is to initiate the venture with a community, facilitate funding, establish an infrastructure, and then leave the community to it.

"It's about community development, so at the end of the day the initiative needs to be self sustaining.

"We now have around 60 young people in Northland involved in the sport and it has exposed them to a whole new universe and lifestyle. We have had teams travel to Rarotonga and the United States to compete which has been a real thrill for them."

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