



Dr Ridivan Firestone (centre) with fellow project researchers Dr Sunia Foliaki and Dr Te Kani Kingi. Other contributors from the School of Public Health include Associate Professor Barry Borman, Dr Lis Ellison-Loschmann and Professor Chris Cunningham.

The Pasifika Way

Big may still be beautiful in the Pacific Islands, but Dr Ridivan Firestone from the Centre for Public Health Research is investigating why obesity rates among young and old populations remain so high.

According to 2012 Ministry of Health statistics, rates among Pacific peoples are as high as 57.9 percent, compared with 27.8 percent in the general population aged over 15 years.

Firestone's project, studying obesity among young and old Pacific peoples, is part of a Health Research Council and Ministry of Health grant of \$315,728 over two years. Previous work has focused on older Pacific people, especially those with established medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

As part of her work, Firestone, of Samoan descent, is enlisting the help of 30 Pacific youth, aged 16 to 24, to quiz their elders. Her question list includes their views on the value of food, its role in how people socialise, the importance attached to these occasions and their social-cultural meanings, including weekly food spending patterns.

The active participation of younger Pacific peoples will be an important aspect of the study, Firestone says.

"This age group has the capacity to understand their own and family social-health realities. They have the capability to make a unique contribution

in addressing the social-health issues relating to the prevention of obesity."

Initially, the young people will be surveyed on their impressions of the cultural-social realities of obesity. They will then be trained to interview their parents and grandparents, and to explore family and cross-generational ideas about the historical-cultural contexts of food.

"The idea is to let the community own the process by getting involved, not just collecting but interpreting the data," she says.

"It takes the onus away from researchers who may not speak the language well and lack an established rapport with the family and/or Pacific community. You also have to develop a fair amount of trust to allow the elders to open up and talk."

Other study questions will explore what food Pacific elders ate as children and the dietary changes they've experienced since being in New Zealand.

Firestone says she also plans to examine photographs from as far back as the 1800s, to chart changes in body size and food practices.

There is a saying in the islands that "Being big is good as it's a sign of health

and wealth not just for the family but for the community," Firestone says.

Last year, Firestone met a community of Irish travellers, previously known as gypsies or tinkers, who had been involved in similar studies of their own people. She engaged with the questions being asked as part of these studies, with a view to applying them in a Pacific Island context.

After training in speech language therapy at the University of Canterbury, Firestone completed a Master in Public Health at the University of Otago. She then obtained a PhD on obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome from Massey.

Two Pacific Island researchers, and a Masters and a PhD candidate will help her to collate and analyse the information, enabling the development of research capacity among emerging Pacific researchers.

"This study will yield new insights into the cultural, social and historical meanings of food and diet. We hope these can be further developed in creative and innovative ways to promote health and wellbeing not only in Pacific peoples, but in other population groups as well," Firestone says.