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Changing the lives of Pacific youth

Waitematā DHB's community alcohol and drug service (CADS) is leading the way with a specialised programme for Pacific youth who experience alcohol and/or drug issues.

Niu Tupu is targeted at young people from 13-years and up, and uses an interactive, peer group approach. Run in collaboration with schools, the newly expanded programme offers group workshops and one-on-one counselling for more at-risk youth.

"Alcohol and drug use affects all parts of a young person's life – family, spirituality, education, work and relationships – so we take an holistic approach," says Niu Tupu counsellor, Michael Tapu.

The only programme of its kind in the northern region, Niu Tupu originated from a gap identified by team leader Dwaine Faletanoai. A drug and alcohol counsellor at the time, Dwaine saw a need to address alcohol and drug issues at an earlier age, before they became more ingrained in young lives and harder to shift. Now he's leading the team that's transforming the lives of young Pacific people.

"It's about early intervention," says Dwaine. "Although drug and alcohol use is relatively common across ethnic groups, rates of harmful uptake are more prominent in communities like Pacific peoples. We don't come to inform but to transform."

A key factor in the group's success is its relationship with schools. Workshops are tailored to what the schools want and adapted to the audience. They are interactive with a Pacific lens, and provide practical tools that participants can apply to their daily lives.

"One of things I love about my job is the genuine interactions I have with young people," says Niu Tupu Coordinator, Posala Taotua. "Seeing them have a 'light bulb' moment in a workshop is incredibly rewarding."

"The pay day for me is when there's been a change and they go back to school, church, work," says Michael.

Niu Tupu means seed, while Tupu means growth and the programme's philosophy is about acknowledging the learning's of the past and how they can best promote healing and ensure growth in the present and the future.

"Listening to our stories, and learning about our journey brings it home to them. In turn, this helps our youth succeed and flourish," says Michael.

Referrals for the programme are made through participating schools.

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