



About Otago

Mō Ōtākou

"I want to go into medicine and be the brown face that brown people can see."

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Tamapuretu Po Mitaera has been studying the respiratory effects of COVID-19.

An Otago student determined to add another Pacific voice to the health conversation is making his mark at an unusually young age.

Tamapuretu Po Mitaera (Tama), who is studying the respiratory effects of COVID-19, has had his most recent research feature in PubMed, an honour he understands is not usually bestowed on a 23-year-old.

He hopes his research will result in him better understanding the mechanisms involved in the pathogenesis of the disease and that knowledge can be used in the development of novel therapies.

It is an achievement he appreciates the significance of.

The road so far, has not been a clear-cut one, but with hard work and the support of his Mum, Tama is looking at a bright future.

Originally from Rarotonga, Tama and his mum relocated to Wellington when he was an infant.

He is the second in his family to take up studies at university and says a key reason for that decision was his mum telling him he "had to".

The head of Social Work for over ten years at a tertiary institute, his mum is a well-educated woman.

She was also often sick when he was young, which was where he first saw inequities in health care.

He recalls the time a paramedic arrived at the home and asked his mum if she spoke English and has witnessed medical professionals, including doctors, assume because of the colour of her skin that his mum could not make decisions for herself or her health, he says.

"This is why I want to go into medicine and be the brown face that brown people can see - because they know they'll be looked after. That's what stops a lot of people from getting help, being turned down by professionals who don't understand them or their culture."

He has always had a fascination with science and health and refers to himself as "a bit of a geek" who likes to understand how things work.

In 2017 he moved to Dunedin from Wellington to take up Health Sciences First Year (HSFY), a move he says was a challenge even just as a teenager moving out of home.

"My intention was to go to Medical School and that is still my goal. HSFY didn't work out for me. I struggled to put in the work needed and it was an overwhelming experience. When you first move out of home you need time to focus on building new relationships and find your place."

He changed his route to Medical School and took up a Bachelor of Science where he could focus on the subjects he enjoyed most while settling into his new life in Dunedin.

"I took some anatomy papers, knowing that understanding physiology would really help me with medicine later on."

The hard work is paying off, with him now completing his Diploma for Graduates and contributing to life-changing research.

"Not only do you get a lot of knowledge over those three years in a Bachelor's, but you develop some emotional maturity as well. It can be a lot for a younger second year to go

straight into medicine. After my first degree I feel like I'm in a much better place to study and I can see that now in my postgrad studies."

Next year, Tama plans to continue onto his Master's degree and would like to continue similar research in the use of nicotine and vaping. His goal is to benefit others in the Pacific community.

"I've witnessed first-hand, the systemic racism engrained in the health care system towards Pacific. Only by including more Pacific voices in the conversation of health, can we begin to make the necessary changes for the betterment of our Pacific people and their future."

Kōrero by Internal Communications Adviser Chelsea McRae