

A healthy disregard for the status quo

Earlier this year, Dr Lance O’Sullivan had a chance encounter with three young Māori boys in his Kaitaia community. And that brief conversation on the side of the road beautifully illustrated just how his iMOKO™ programme is delivering transformational change.

Developed by dynamic husband-and-wife team, Lance and Tracy O’Sullivan, iMOKO™ is a digital platform that empowers Māori communities to manage their own health outcomes. The centrepiece is the iMOKO™ app, which allows doctors to prescribe remotely for common children’s health problems. There’s also a free app for parents, which lets them access their child’s diagnostic and prescribing information.

One year after its launch, the roadside anecdote perfectly illustrates why the programme is succeeding. Lance was out driving the iMoko car, when “three Māori boys with big cheeky grins” approached him.

“They didn’t recognise me, but they asked if I was with the iMoko team. Curious, I asked them what they knew about it. One of the boys says: ‘three weeks ago I had these haki on my legs. I went to see Whaea Lisa and she used the iMoko ipad, and I got better.’”

Reflecting on it later, Lance realised three significant things.

“Firstly, they didn’t know who I was... and that’s awesome, because we want our health workforce to have a light touch. We shouldn’t have our fingerprints over everything. I just happened to be the doctor that had approved their prescription remotely, from wherever I was in the world at the time.

“Secondly, this child saw Whaea Lisa as his healthcare provider, not Dr Lance. She’s a mum in the community who’s teaching them reading recovery one minute, then helping them get better the next. So we’re empowering a layperson and member of their whanau to become more central to that community than the doctor is.

“And thirdly, those boys saw an iPad as a portal to healthcare, not just something to play games and videos on. Imagine in 10 years’ time...we’ll have this health-literate generation of young Māori who’ve grown up knowing they can access health services via an app or device.”

Innovative thinking is nothing new to Lance and Tracy. After 15 years working in mainstream medicine, their idea for iMOKO™ grew out of a flaxroots initiative from the community.

“Our people in the frontline were seeing this desperate unmet need,” says Lance.

“They were saying, we can’t just tinker with change here – we need something radically re-designed. Clearly, the current model is pakaru.”

What’s most exciting, say the O’Sullivans, is that iMOKO™ has been engineered to be fit-for-purpose for Māori. Instead of the Māori programme being the after-thought from the mainstream solution, it’s the other way around.

“What we’re developing in iMOKO also has huge implications for the main-stream population. But it’s absolutely our communities that are the reason for embarking on this. We know this will work for Māori, and for indigenous communities...and hey look, it’s a bonus if it works for everyone else. We’ll just reinvest that into more disruptive and innovative approaches for Māori.”

Not that being at the frontier of disruptive technology is an easy road. Even with a concept as brilliant as iMOKO™, Lance and Tracy have encountered plenty of nay-sayers along the way.

“Disruption threatens incumbent providers, because you’re seeking to change what’s made them comfortable. Disruptive leadership is about going around them, going over them, or going through them. Being brave and being creative are inherently Māori traits. Disruption is a form of protest for us. It’s just that instead of waving flags and banners...we’re waiving APIs and Cloud.”

On globally-connected rangatahi:

The MOKO Foundation is a charity started by the O’Sullivans to create opportunity for rangatahi in Northland. Part of its mission is to bring about a mindshift...from rurally-isolated to globally-connected.

“We’re really instilling this sense in our rangatahi in the North that geographical isolation is no longer a barrier,” says Lance.

“It’s about supporting them with IT and exponential technologies and innovative thinking; so they believe they’re just as capable of creating the next Uber or Air BnB as anyone living in any other part of the world.”

As Tracy explains, the Foundation also provides rangatahi with a range of life-changing opportunities in the global leadership space. They’ve visited the likes of Silicon Valley, Alaska, New York, San Francisco and Washington.

In 2015, the Foundation sent five young people to attend the Tribal Youth Gathering in Washington. It was hosted by the White House and Michelle Obama came and spoke.

“We told them, you’re going to represent Māori on an international stage...go up there and leave a mark. And they absolutely did. We later got feedback from Obama administration staff, describing how inspirational they were.”

On being New Zealand’s busiest couple:

Lance and Tracy balance three huge roles – each of which is a life’s mission on its own. They’re raising a family of seven children, running a high-profile business, and doing community work through the Moko Foundation. So what’s the secret to their enduring partnership?

Lance uses waiora as a metaphor to describe their relationship, with two rivers flowing into balance.

“We complement each other. I’m pretty high-intensity, while Tracy’s rangamarie approach brings that calming and sensible side. If I’m about to make a really heated decision, for instance, she’ll encourage me to process it and give it more thought.”

Away from work, Tracy says the couple are conscious about dialling it down to enjoy family time.

“Lance spends a lot of time away, so when we’re together, I memory-bank him. Whether we’re playing with the boys, or we’re at the beach, or just having a cup of tea...I’ll say to him, we have to remember this moment.”



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Lance and Tracy O’Sullivan

Founders of the Moko Foundation, and the iMOKO™ programme

Te Rarawa, Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Maru (Lance); Te Arawa (Tracy)