Obituary

Celebration of a Samoan Odyssey – Dr Semisi Maiai

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Talofa lava, Good Afternoon and Tena koutou katoa.

I am pleased and deeply honoured to have this opportunity to speak briefly about my relationship with Papaliitele Dr Semisi Maiai.

But first, I want to offer my greetings and condolences to Jenny, Kim, Chris and the whole family.

Just before Christmas in 1987, I arrived in Auckland with my family as a refugee from the military coup in Fiji. We had little money and I was required to complete examinations to register as doctor in NZ. Naturally, it was a stressful time for me. As part of the requirements, I worked at Auckland Hospital Emergency Department.

It wasn’t long before I learnt of Dr Maiai practicing out in Kumeu drawing carloads of Samoan and Pacific patients to his clinic. I met this great man not long after that. He was very kind to me and my family and he helped me enormously. He offered me locums at this practice in Kumeu and introduced me to many of the wine making families in his parish. I regarded him as a mentor and we became good friends and colleagues.

I would describe my friend and colleague as a pioneer. A pioneer is one who goes before with determination, optimism and courage. He/she forges a path for others to follow. It was clear that Dr Maiai was the first and only Pacific doctor in Auckland in the 1970s. He trained in medicine at the Fiji School of Medicine and University of Otago graduating in 1962.

Dr Maiai obtained his Fellowship of the Royal NZ College of General Practitioners in 1999. In 2002, he was awarded the Pasifika Medical Association Service Award for his work with Pacific peoples. Your friends and colleagues from PMA are here, Semisi. In 2003, he was awarded the Queen Service Medal for his work and the NZ Order of Merit in 2016.

I should also say that Dr Maiai was a key member of our group that set up the first Pacific health care provider called Pasifika Healthcare on Lincoln Road in Henderson in 1989. Pasifika Health is currently a large provider of medical and social services in Auckland. Dr Maiai was the anchor for the clinic before we were able to attract other doctors to the service.

His book A Samoan Odyssey – A Life Story details his struggles and joys of being part of the diaspora, his family life and views of the world. I was drawn to the on the Fiji Medical School because I spent a large part of my youth there. In the graduating class of 1950, Leopino Foliaki scooped all the prizes in medical finals. He was called the ‘Golden Boy’. Later, Leopino and Semisi were key figures in the establishment of the Pacific Health and Welfare Society at the PIERCE in Herne Bay. The Society continues their work sharing health information on radio and other media for Pacific peoples living in Auckland.

It is interesting that he chose to call his life story ‘Odyssey’ – Homer’s poem about the long journey of a man called Odysseus (Ulysses), King of Ithaca and his journey home after the fall of Troy. Odyssey is a long wandering or voyage marked by many changes of fortune. Dr Maiai’s own life story is a long wandering from his birthplace in Sapapaali’i.

Papali’itele was not only a healer but a writer. He was passionate about the Samoan culture and language. He was very particular about the use of macrons and glottal stops and he was very unhappy with those who had ‘bastardised’ the language. In 1991, he published the Samoan Medical Glossary. His major achievement was the publication of the first ever bilingual Samoan
English dictionary ‘Tusi Upu Samoa’. We helped his launch this 40 year labour of love at Te Papa Museum in 2010.

Dr Maiai was very happy to see many of the young Pacific graduates in the health professions. He believed that this trend would help improve the health status of Pacific people in NZ – something that he had tried hard to address in his time.

Papaali’itele Dr Semisi Maiai had a huge impact on me. I am currently assisting the Niue community with efforts to revitalise Vagahau Niue in my own amateurish way.

Thank you for your kindness, guidance and advice. Thank you for your pioneering spirit and for being the inspiration that you were. To the Maiai family, thank you for sharing him with the wider Pacific community.

Soifua

REFERENCE