

# Traditional Healing | Rongoā Māori Outcomes

## The voices of kiritaki

**Prepared for ACC**

**Te Paetawhiti & Associates (January 2025)**

**Roxanne Smith, Rutene Gabel, Dr Shane Edwards, Earle Karini and Colin Hemana Bennett**

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# Mihi

He pō, he ao, tākiri mai te ata, kōrihi mai te manu, ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea!

Tēnei te mihi maioha a Te Paetawhiti ki te hunga kiritaki nānā nei i hora mai te kōrero hei taonga hiranga mā mātau me ā mātau mahi, tēnā koutou me te wairua o te kōrero. Ka haere hoki ngā mihi ki te roopu rongoā Māori me o rātou hoa kaimahi. Nānā nei i kōkiri i tēnei kaupapa, tērā ko te whai i te māramatanga mō te hua o te rongoā Māori mō te iwi whānui o Aotearoa, tēnā tātau katoa.

# Executive Summary

Rongoā Māori is an indigenous system of traditional healing that takes a holistic approach to wellbeing, addressing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social aspects of health. In recent years, ACC has made rongoā Māori available to kiritaki (clients) recovering from injury. This offering has resulted in significant demand for ACC funded rongoā Māori by Māori and non-Māori, with over 12,000<sup>1</sup> kiritaki accessing rongoā Māori services across the country. To better understand kiritaki experiences and the outcomes of rongoā Māori, ACC commissioned research focused specifically on the results kiritaki have achieved through this approach.

This research report is based on interviews with 28 kiritaki across the country. The research explored:

- The impact of rongoā Māori on recovery
- Outcomes experienced by kiritaki, including how well rongoā Māori outcomes compare to outcomes achieved through universal rehabilitation services for similar injuries
- How well outcomes achieved relate to those described in ACC's Māori outcome framework, Te Kāpehu Whetū, and
- Opportunities, if any, to further improve benefits related to rehabilitation and prevention of reinjury.

This research found that rongoā Māori has had a significant impact on kiritaki experiencing various short and long-term injuries (including physical injury and emotional trauma). Kiritaki reported that rongoā Māori helped heal their physical injuries and positively influenced their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. For some, this healing extended to their families and whānau, reconnecting kiritaki Māori (Māori clients) with their Māori identity and empowering them to incorporate rongoā practices into their daily lives. The rongoā Māori practitioner was critical to the process, including their ability to build trust, and create safe and non-judgmental spaces for kiritaki to reconnect with themselves ā-wairua, ā-tinana, ā-hinengaro in order to progress their recovery and wellbeing.

Kiritaki described the rongoā Māori process as respectful, dignified, personalised and spiritual. Each kiritaki had a unique journey of recovery and resilience, with personal stories captured in the quotes provided in this report.

Outcomes realised by kiritaki as a result of using rongoā Māori have been framed within the indicators of Puāwaitanga in Te Kāpehu Whetū (a framework developed by ACC to help articulate and evaluate outcomes for Māori through whakaaro Māori). These indicators include taha tinana, taha Māori, taha whānau, taha hinengaro, taha wairua and taha whenua.

1. **Taha Tinana:** Rongoā Māori is supporting kiritaki to recover from physical injuries in some cases more quickly and holistically than through universal services. It is also supporting kiritaki to heal from physical pain manifested through emotional trauma.
2. **Taha Māori:** Rongoā Māori is supporting kiritaki to engage in Māori rituals (including karakia, reo, waiata, whakapapa, wairua, whakawatea, rongoā rākau) that support their health and wellbeing, as well as deepen their connection to their tuakiri Māori (for those kiritaki who identify as Māori).

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<sup>1</sup> As at 28 October 2024, the number of kiritaki accessing rongoā Māori was 12,345 (data provided by ACC)

3. **Taha Whānau:** Rongoā Māori has helped kiritaki reconnect with their whānau and/or community, especially those who may have been isolated due to trauma, anxiety, PTSD and physical injury.
4. **Taha Hinengaro:** Rongoā Māori has helped kiritaki regain confidence and independence and rebuild their mental and emotional resilience.
5. **Taha Wairua:** Rongoā Māori has helped kiritaki connect with the past and present, supporting their future through holistic healing. After engaging with mirimiri, kiritaki reported feeling lighter, clearer, calmer and more content. They also noticed improvements in daily functioning, sleep quality and the ability to build positive social connections.
6. **Taha Whenua (Land):** Rongoā Māori created a pathway for some kiritaki to reconnect with their taiao (natural environment), including rongoā rākau (kawakawa, kumarahou, tūpākihi), wai and ancestral whenua as part of their journey to recovery and rejuvenation.

Compared to outcomes realised through universal services, kiritaki described rongoā Māori outcomes as being more holistic. Rongoā Māori, in particular mirimiri, was described as a spiritual journey where the practitioner was able to heal, or provide relief from, the trauma experienced through physical and/or emotional injury at the same time. In addition, kiritaki Māori also experienced cultural outcomes including a greater connection to te reo Māori, te ao Māori, whakapapa and whenua. As a result, some kiritaki Māori were exploring other rongoā Māori modalities to support their wellbeing including rongoā rākau (herbal remedies), whakawhiti kōrero and wānanga. Underpinning the recovery journey however was a belief in the healing properties of rongoā Māori. Without this belief kiritaki felt that the outcomes and impact may be limited.

Areas for improvement included increasing kiritaki involvement and autonomy in decision-making processes that affected them, which is a key success indicator for Māori within Te Kāpehu Whetū. Kiritaki were often unclear about how they could apply for rongoā Māori, how long they could access rongoā Māori for and how decisions were made pertaining to their access, which was further contributing to their stress. A consistent and proactive approach to reaching out to kiritaki consistently, combined with transparent processes and communications regarding eligibility, funding and feedback opportunities, should be considered.

It is also evident through the data that the demand for rongoā Māori is increasing from both Māori and non-Māori kiritaki. Without a clear strategy around the future investment into rongoā Māori, including perhaps investment into building whānau and hapū- based rongoā Māori practitioners there is a risk that rongoā Māori could become a commodity expected to be supplied as and when needed. The implications of this risk for the sustainability and integrity of an ancient practice requires further inquiry and conversation between ACC and its rongoā Māori partners.

Overall, kiritaki who participated in this research confirmed that rongoā Māori is an appropriate and meaningful healing system for all New Zealanders. Kiritaki positively impacted by their experience of using rongoā Māori often recommended it to close friends, family and whānau as a pathway to healing and holistic wellbeing. Rongoā Māori is considered a credible approach that aligns with the cultural and spiritual values of both Māori and non-Māori and is built on a model of trust, openness, confidence and safety between the kiritaki and the rongoā practitioner.

# He Kōrero Whakataki | Introduction

## Rongoā Māori

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Rongoā Māori is an indigenous system of traditional healing techniques that takes a holistic approach to wellbeing addressing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social aspects of health and healing (Mark et al., 2019). It is a credible practice, often passed down through generations. Practitioners or healers act as mediators between their tūpuna (ancestors) and the kiritaki (client), as well as between the living and the deceased to facilitate and contribute to the healing of the kiritaki (Mark et al., 2019). Rongoā Māori comprises various components, many of which are used in combination, including:

- ritenga and karakia, or rituals and incantations
- wairākau or rongoā rākau, or plant medicines/herbal remedies
- mirimiri, a form of bodywork, usually to relieve sore joints and limbs but sometimes also to force evil spirits or kēhua from a sufferer's body. Subcategories of mirimiri include romiromi (using the fingers) or takahi (the feet)
- water, used in cleansing rituals or treatment of sickness (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011)
- minor surgical interventions (ibid), and
- matakite (Mark et al., 2018; Mark et al., 2019).

ACC also funds whitiwhiti kōrero (including pastoral support) as part of its rongoā services.

Since its introduction in 2020, the demand for ACC-funded rongoā Māori services has grown significantly. In 2021, ACC's Te Rangapū Hauora Māori (Māori Health Team) commissioned research into the use of rongoā and the new ACC Rongoā Māori service. This research aims to capture the experiences of kiritaki and the outcomes they have achieved through rongoā Māori. The findings will help build an evidence base for rongoā Māori at ACC and enhance understanding of its value within the health system.

## ACC and Rongoā Māori

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Since ACC started offering rongoā Māori services in June 2020, the number of registered providers and kiritaki has steadily grown. By June 2021, there were 20 ACC-registered rongoā Māori providers (Wehipeihana et al., 2021), with ACC receiving approximately 1,200 claims and funding nearly 7,245 sessions<sup>2</sup>. By October 2024, ACC's Rongoā Māori service has grown to 226 registered rongoā practitioners, spanning from Kaitiaki to Stewart Island, delivering more than 121,000 sessions to over 12,000 kiritaki<sup>3</sup>. Non-Māori represent around 40% of kiritaki accessing the Rongoā Māori service.

While rongoā Māori is available nationwide, the largest numbers of clients are in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Gisborne and Auckland regions. There has been significant growth of ACC-funded

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<sup>2</sup> [Rongoā Māori: A traditional healing choice for all \(acc.co.nz\)](https://www.acc.co.nz/our-work/te-rangapu-hauora-maori/rongoa-maori)

<sup>3</sup> [The phenomenal growth of rongoā Māori \(acc.co.nz\)](https://www.acc.co.nz/our-work/te-rangapu-hauora-maori/rongoa-maori)

rongoā Māori support across Te Waipounamu and Wellington. <sup>4</sup>

## **Huakina Te Rā | ACC Strategy**

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Huakina Te Rā is ACC's strategy for financial years 2023-2032 and builds on ACC's Māori Strategy, Whāia Te Tika ("pursue what is right"). Huakina Te Rā is a Te Tiriti/Treaty-based strategy with a clear response for Māori and all people in Aotearoa. Huakina Te Rā has three long term goals:

1. Mana Taurite | Equity is our dual goal for all people in Aotearoa New Zealand to experience accessible services and improved outcomes.
2. Ringa Atawhai | Guardianship is our dual goal for the Scheme to be sustainable for present and future generations.
3. Oranga Whānau | Safe and Resilient Communities is our dual goal to partner and invest to help create safer and more resilient communities.

Enabling greater access to rongoā Māori is a key component of ACC's contribution to supporting Māori wellbeing.

## **Te Kāpehu Whetū | ACC Māori Outcomes Framework**

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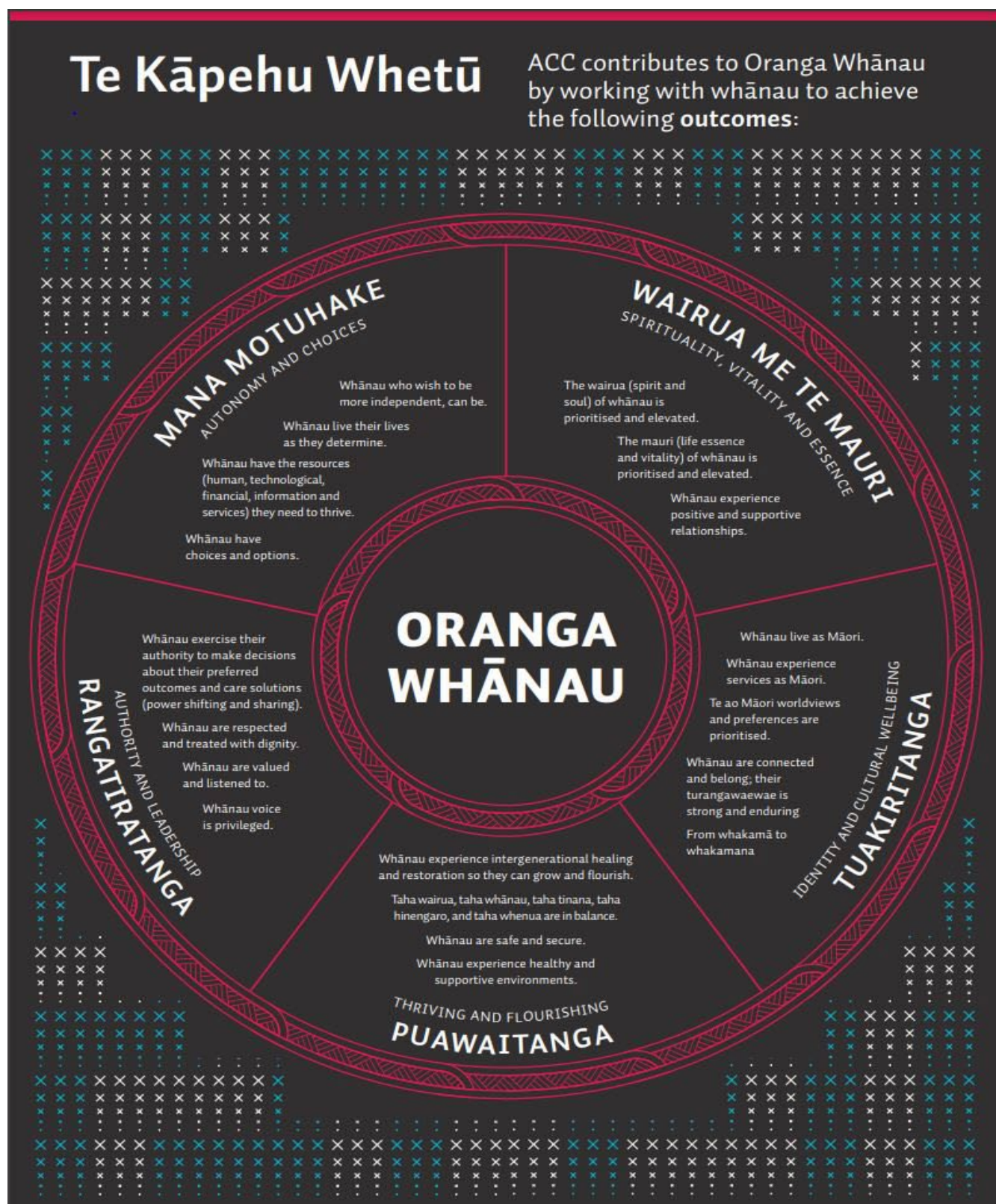
ACC has developed a Māori outcomes framework to help articulate and evaluate outcomes for Māori through whakaaro Māori (Māori ways of thinking). The current draft framework is reflected in Figure 1. The outcomes of Te Kāpehu Whetū are also reflected in Huakina Te Rā:

- Mana Motuhake | Whānau have the choices, options and resources to live their lives as they determine.
- Rangatiratanga | Whānau are respected and valued to exercise their authority over decisions about their preferred outcomes and care solutions.
- Puāwaitanga | Whānau experience safe, secure and healthy supportive environments.
- Tuakiritanga | Te Ao Māori world views are prioritised where whānau experience services as Māori to support whānau connection and belonging.
- Wairua me te Mauri | The wairua and mauri of Māori is prioritised and elevated to enable positive and supportive relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Since 2020 the number of rongoā Māori providers has increased in Te Waipounamu from two in 2020 to 30 in 2024; and in Wellington the number has increased from one provider in 2020 to 20 in 2024.

Figure 1 | Te Kāpehu Whetū | ACC's Māori Outcomes Framework



# Ngā Whakaritenga | Research Approach and Activities

This research examines the role of rongoā Māori in rehabilitation and reinjury prevention by gathering insights from kiritaki – those most impacted by rongoā Māori. It is an in-depth inquiry into the experiences of kiritaki. The pace, depth of the kōrero and the method of engagement (e.g. online, by phone or in person) were determined by kiritaki preferences to ensure they felt comfortable, empowered and positive about participating in the research.

## Ngā Pātai Rangahau

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The research aimed to answer the following questions:

### *The impact of rongoā Māori on recovery*

1. To what extent is rongoā Māori helping kiritaki and whānau recover well, following an injury?

### *Outcomes experienced by kiritaki*

2. What outcomes, if any, are kiritaki and whānau achieving through rongoā Māori, as articulated by them?
  - a. Holistic perspective of outcomes (emotional, spiritual, physical, connectedness to whānau)
  - b. Rehabilitation/functional perspective of outcomes (e.g. reduction in pain, quicker recovery time, improved quality of life, prevention of reinjury, return to independence)
3. How has rongoā Māori contributed to these outcomes?

### *How 'good' are these outcomes*

4. How do these outcomes relate to outcomes ACC kiritaki and whānau have achieved from universal services in the past?
5. How do these outcomes compare to outcomes achieved through universal rehabilitation services for similar injuries?
6. How do these outcomes relate to rehabilitation/functional outcomes expected from universal rehabilitation services?
7. How do these outcomes relate to those described in ACC's Māori outcome framework, Te Kāpehu Whetū? i.e. wairua me te mauri, mana motuhake, rangatiratanga, puāwaitanga, tuakiritanga.

### *Opportunities for improvement*

8. What opportunities are there, if any, to further improve benefits related to rehabilitation and prevention of reinjury?

## Research Methodology

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Our approach to evaluative research draws from kaupapa Māori evaluation theory and practice. Kaupapa Māori evaluation is a philosophical approach to evaluating the extent to which an initiative serves the needs and aspirations of Māori and facilitates the realisation of Māori potential. This methodology guides key evaluation questions, strengthens evaluative thinking and capacity, and shapes the selection and development of evaluation methods (Cram

et al.,2018).

Kaupapa Māori evaluation is informed by kaupapa Māori theory, which affirms Māori worldviews as authoritative, legitimate and valid (Smith, 1999). Kaupapa Māori also lends itself to qualitative research processes that ensure Māori are empowered to participate in, and influence changes to, processes, programmes and policies that affect them.

## **Ethics**

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### ***Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee***

Ethics approval was granted on 23 July 2024 from the Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee. The research team was also guided by the cultural, ethical, research, legal and scientific (CERLS) issues for rongoā Māori research guidelines.

### ***Informed consent***

Kiritaki were invited to participate in the research by email. The email included a description of the project, the reasons why they were selected, their right to not participate, and a copy of the information sheet and consent form.

## **Data Methods, Recruitment and Analysis**

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### ***Method***

The research adopted a qualitative approach, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted either ā-ipurangi (online) or ā-waea (phone), depending on the preference of the kiritaki. Researchers were provided a set of guidelines to ensure consistency in the interview questions while remaining responsive to the individual stories shared by each kiritaki.

Kiritaki were given the option to be interviewed in English or te reo Māori. One interview was conducted entirely in te reo Māori.

### ***Recruitment and selection***

At the time of commencing the rangahau ACC has a list of nearly 6,000 kiritaki who have accessed rongoā Māori. It was therefore agreed that the criteria for recruitment would be kiritaki who had accessed rongoā Māori services regularly within the past two years. These criteria ensured kiritaki experience was recent enough in order for them to recollect their experience and form an opinion. ACC then contacted an initial list of 128 kiritaki to advise them of the research and to let them know that an independent party would contact them to follow up their willingness to participate in the research. The contact details were then passed on to the Research Lead through a secure SharePoint file.

The research team filtered the list by age, location, gender, ethnicity and injury (Assisted<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> General injuries and sprains

Partnered<sup>6</sup>, and Supported<sup>7</sup>) to ensure a diverse sample of kiritaki were invited to take part in the research. Given the research was aimed at gathering the stories of 30 kiritaki, the invitation to participate was sent out in blocks of 30, if no response was received after two email attempts, the kiritaki was registered as “did not respond” and invitations were sent to new kiritaki. After 10 kiritaki interviews the sample was reviewed and an additional 52 contacts were provided from ACC to the Research Lead to increase the sample. Specific groups of kiritaki were then prioritised to ensure the final sample was representative.

While ACC provided contact information to support the research, ACC does not know who was interviewed. Of the 160 kiritaki contacted, 28 were interviewed (refer table 1).

**Table 1 | Number of kiritaki contacted and response**

Kiritaki response to invitation	Number
Interviewed	28
Declined to participate	9
Did not respond to invitation	123
Yet to contact	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>

Of the 28 kiritaki interviewed, 68% (19) identified as Māori, 46% (13) were aged between 36-45 years, and 25% were aged between 56-65 years. No kiritaki interviewed were under the age of 25 years. Kiritaki interviewed lived across most regions within New Zealand except Auckland.

**Table 2 | Number of kiritaki interviewed and region of residence**

Region of residence of kiritaki	Number
Wellington	5
Waikato Region	4
Bay of Plenty	3
Southland Region	3
Taranaki Region	2
Canterbury Region	1
Hawke's Bay Region	2
Gisborne Region	2
Marlborough-Nelson Region	2
Otago Region	1
Manawatu-Wanganui Region	1
West Coast Region	1
Northland	1
Auckland Region	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

<sup>6</sup> One on One support for more complex injuries

<sup>7</sup> Long-term serious injury

## ***Analysis***

All audio files were transcribed, and transcripts were coded to maintain participant anonymity. The data analysis followed a thematic approach, with the research team meeting regularly to discuss the themes emerging from the interviews. These themes informed the development of a coding framework, which each researcher used to analyse their transcripts against the research questions. The team met to synthesize the data and identify key findings, which formed the foundations of the verbal presentation to ACC and the written research report.

## ***Limitations***

There are limitations to the methodology. While the research team used demographic information to ensure a diverse sample of kiritaki were invited to take part in the research, they did not screen those who agreed to be interviewed. All those who agreed to be interviewed were interviewed. We tried to expand representation from particular cohorts by inviting kiritaki from those cohorts to take part in the research.

The process of allowing kiritaki who accepted the invitation to participate to koha (gift) their experiences to the kaupapa was considered in accordance with our kaupapa Māori research practice and principles. As a result, the mix of experiences has further added to the depth and integrity of the research findings.

Despite the limitations of recruitment and selection, the sample interviewed reflected different regions, ethnicity and age. Furthermore, some kiritaki had only experienced one or two rongoā Māori sessions and some had been accessing ACC funded rongoā Māori regularly over a longer term.

## ***Use of quotes***

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Quotes have been edited for clarity and to protect the identity of participants. Care has been taken to ensure that edits have not altered meaning. Quotes have been left in the language in which they were rendered. Individuals have not been named, however, to ensure greater context and understanding, the quotes have been attributed to gender, ethnicity and age of the kiritaki.

# The Impact of Rongoā Māori

The journey to recovery for each kiritaki was unique and deeply personal, showcasing their courage and resilience to overcome mental, physical and emotional challenges. For some, rongoā Māori became a last resort after other interventions had failed to fully meet their needs. They sought hope, reprieve and a return to functionality in their lives again. Rongoā Māori provided the healing they were seeking. The following accounts reflect their lived experiences.

## Rongoā Māori is a holistic remedy that heals the mind, body and spirit

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All kiritaki interviewed described their experience with rongoā Māori as deeply holistic and spiritual. For some, the healing they experienced exceeded their expectations:

*It's probably the most beneficial health intervention I've had ... my pain reduces after I see my [rongoā practitioner]. And I also feel a sense of wellbeing ... it feels more connected, and it feels more, well I suppose spiritually whole, it feels like there are more dimensions of healing going on than just purely physical (Wahine, Māori, 66-75yrs).*

One kiritaki talked about the importance of balancing her recovery from physical pain with the need to also look after and rebalance her taha hinengaro and taha wairua. Through kōrero with her rongoā practitioner, she was able to relax her mind, reconnect and build her confidence to draw on her strengths:

*So, it was the rongoā process that helped me through my injury because I was just needing that reconnection, that safety, taking care of myself emotionally and mentally. Because when you are in that chronic pain, the pain is just the physical. It's the mental that's worse. You've got to keep that safe because physical will always be there ... it just reconnected me internally. So it made me learn to go back into myself to rebalance myself because you get lost, you get fixated on trying to fight the pain when you need to go back in and do that karakia, talk to yourself, reconnect to people who are listening, our tīpuna, and draw some strength from that (Wahine, Māori (2), 36-45yrs).*

Similarly, the following kiritaki interviewed described their experience of rongoā Māori as being a whole-body healing experience that contributed greatly to their quality of life:

*I feel like I've got quality of life, just not physically, but spiritually. I'm more grounded within myself and my culture and with who I am really (Wahine, Māori (17), 36-45yrs).*

*I had a sore tinana affecting me that was outside of the injury. That wasn't easy to convince ACC or even to talk to them how I wanted to approach it. So we dealt with my whole tinana, my spiritual connection to te ao Māori, from my upoko down to my waewae, it had a holistic effect with me, spiritual, physically, emotionally and to the point where I've been able to bring some of those lessons home that I've learnt from those practitioners from our rongoā Māori and insert it in my own life and from our Pure [cleansing process] afterwards that they would recommend me have is an important process of healing ... when I started to understand that I was able to heal myself from within my tinana, my hinengaro my whare tapawhā I was able to get that holistic healing that I was searching for (Tane, Māori (4), 36-45yrs).*

*I wanted to do everything I possibly could to heal well and look after myself ... so I did the standard route of the health system, doing physio and seeing specialists and things. But I also wanted a broader perspective, and I liked the fact that rongoā Māori incorporates a lot of mental*

*and spiritual aspects to the healing process, and that really appealed to me. I personally noticed a significant improvement in my own wellbeing when I incorporated that into my holistic approach (Wahine, European, (13) 36-45yrs).*

### **Rongoā Māori is a traditional healing option for all New Zealanders**

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Kiritaki felt that rongoā Māori is a relevant and appropriate health and wellbeing remedy for all New Zealanders:

*It's good for Māori and non-Māori. It can support people's wellbeing no matter what ethnicity, what age ... it's all-encompassing (Wahine, European, (13) 36-45yrs).*

*I totally think it's beneficial to anyone that would use it ... I think everyone can benefit from it, and I don't see any need for any restriction or reason not to be available to absolutely everyone (Tane, European (14) 56-65yrs).*

Rongoā Māori was considered a credible system of healing that aligned to the cultural and spiritual values of both Māori and non-Māori:

*My main reason for using rongoā Māori was because I am Māori and it's part of who I am, my whakapapa, my beliefs ... it just aligns with what I believe in and what I accept to be a process and more because of the wairua approach, its more than the physical ... it's a connection, it's a reconnection back to who we are rather than going into a building and you are having a kōrero with someone who isn't aligned with who you are (Wahine, Māori, 36-45yrs).*

*Physically there was benefits to the mirimiri that definitely I think was a big positive attribute to my healing process spiritually. Also, because of my own personal spiritual beliefs, I felt that was an aspect that I would never get anywhere else from a health practitioner that I could connect to and feel healing through ancestral connections (Wahine, European (13), 36-45yrs).*

*It's been invaluable to me ... I float out of there when I come out of seeing them ... I didn't believe that ACC would ever cover something like this. So, I embrace the Māori traditional medicine ... it doesn't matter whether you're Māori, Polynesian, Pākehā, Asian, there's a huge benefit in what they're doing for us (Tane, European (14) 56-65yrs).*

### **Rongoā Māori assists in recovery from short (physical injury) and long-term injuries (trauma)**

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Rongoā Māori has helped kiritaki to recover from short term injuries (usually physical) and to start the process of addressing longer term injuries caused through past trauma. One kiritaki highlighted the powerful impact of rongoā Māori on helping him to recover from the mamae (pain) he has been carrying since he was abused while in state care at a young age. His journey is a remarkable example of his strength of character and resilience, and the healing powers of rongoā Māori:

*Honestly, I don't know what's going on. I've got my eyes closed, I've got my head down and I just switch off ... I've had over an hour and three quarters in some sessions. At the first session I turned over and then the practitioner said to me 'how are you feeling?' And I was talking about Lake Alice. I was talking about my childhood, and she said, 'let's have a look at this ... we'll get some of this out of you'. And I repeated after her a few things, and then she felt on my righthand side into my tummy. She said, 'that's where it's held'. And it was just unbelievable. I've never felt anything like it. The relief of all this stuff was coming through my head, down and out into her hands. And yeah, I was just a total mess crying. But they were so lovely ... and I could feel the*

*stuff just drawing out of me, all the tension, all the abuse, everything I had coming out ... I couldn't describe the feeling of the relief of all this tension coming out of my body and being sucked out ... it is such a spiritual experience ... (Tane, European (14) 56-65yrs).*

Another kiritaki shared the experience of realising she was carrying intergenerational trauma that was impacting her current wellbeing. Through her rongoā Māori journey she was able to release some of the trauma and restore her wairua:

*For me understanding spirituality is really huge when you get into the mamae that is just handed down from generation to generation ... I'm only learning that now ... once you can see you start fixing the intergenerational trauma and start restoring your wairua and your mana and working on yourself and your body, you have more gratitude for what your ancestors and others went through. You've got understanding, shall I say ... when you have multiple trauma and intergenerational trauma, the more you work on it and release it out of your body, it's a relief like nothing I've ever felt before (Wahine, Māori (17) 36-42yrs).*

### **The relationship between the rongoā Māori practitioner and kiritaki is paramount**

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All kiritaki shared that the relationship with their practitioner was vital to the quality of their experience. They described their practitioner as making them feel safe and comfortable; they were non-judgmental, reducing any feelings of whakamā (shame or embarrassment) kiritaki were feeling. The kōrero (conversation), karakia (prayers), and environment were also essential enablers of a quality experience:

*... it was nice to go to someone that I felt safe with, that I could talk to on a deeper level ... you can't just go to the doctor and talk that kōrero with them and them to understand because it goes straight to medical or cognitive, but for Māori it's spiritual (Wahine, Māori, 36-45yrs).*

*She [practitioner] is very good. She's tries very hard to be in tune with you and work with what works for you and yeah, she's a very lovely person ... I always felt so much better. Whether it's the way she's with you, what she hears, what she gives, and her practice. Because I think there's some things you can't solve, but if they can make you feel good, that helps a lot too (Wahine, European (30) 66-75yrs).*

*She [practitioner] just makes it comfortable. You just walk in, the space is perfect, the smell, the heat. Just the whole thing is, I don't know if you could get it anymore perfect. Where her place is, it's like right on the beach. I think that does weigh in where it's situated her and what she's doing (Tane, European (7) 36-45yrs).*

*I'd rate her a 5 out of 5, just because of the care and kindness that I receive. As well as the physical healing. It's all in tandem ... it's much, much deeper. How can I explain it? It's such a respect and kindness that's built up between us that goes beyond just work. She's just a lovely person ... and she's got a little bit of lived experience as well. So, when you connect on that level, there's no pretence and I can just be myself with her, which is quite a rare thing in this world for me (Wahine, European (20), 56-65yrs).*

Some kiritaki were travelling between 30 minutes and an hour to attend mirimiri sessions with their rongoā practitioners. However, for one kiritaki the support received was so great that she never missed a session, despite the growing travel cost:

*I must travel, it's about 53 minutes ... I go fortnightly, but it's worth it for my peace of mind. I know if I miss one of my appointments, I can feel my anxiety starting to wind up again. So, I try not to miss it ... I'd like to have it done every week, but it gets a bit costly because I'm traveling so far (Wahine, European (21) 56-65yrs).*

One kiritaki was supported by tangata Tiriti practitioners and felt that they fully respected and valued the role they played in a Māori healing process:

*They weren't all Māori, but they were respectful of what they were doing and performing ... there was tangata Tiriti and our Pacific Island people ... but they, first and foremost, respected that they were performing a cultural service that had kind of descended from our culture, Māori culture. And so, I felt that connection with them (Tane Māori (4) 36-45yrs).*

### **Rongoā Māori is so impactful that kiritaki are recommending it to others**

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Most kiritaki were so positively impacted by their experience of using rongoā Māori that they have recommended it to their close friends, family and whānau to enhance their wellbeing:

*I would recommend everybody to use the rongoā services and not just the recommended back to work program with a physio, although I think it's important, but I certainly believe that our rongoā services understand the treatment that they're providing on a holistic level. And so, we are never just dealing with a physical element (Tane, Māori (4) 36-45yrs).*

*I would recommend people do it if you are Māori or not Māori, because she said she gets a lot of people in, but they're not Māori ... I know some people that are like, no, don't do that, don't trust them, but she made it about you, about your illness and that's the best thing. That's what you need to heal. So, I healed both physically and holistically (Wahine, Māori, (10), 36-45yrs).*

### **Summary**

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Rongoā Māori is extending its reach, relevance and impact for kiritaki across different cultures, age groups, gender and philosophical beliefs. The holistic approach of rongoā Māori meant that kiritaki benefited positively irrespective of their type of injury. Kiritaki described feeling respected, heard, and connected to themselves, their wairua and their culture (kiritaki Māori). The rongoā practitioner is critical; when kiritaki felt comfortable, safe and understood they were more likely to open their mind and heart to healing.

## Outcomes realised by kiritaki

This section is focused on what outcomes, if any, kiritaki and whānau have achieved through rongoā Māori. The outcomes experienced by kiritaki as a result of accessing rongoā Māori have been framed using the indicators of Puāwaitanga in Te Kāpehu Whetū, specifically, taha tinana, taha Māori, taha whānau, taha hinengaro and taha wairua. Additionally, some kiritaki highlighted the importance of reconnecting with the whenua and taiao.

Interviews with kiritaki generally fell into two categories: those who experienced a physical injury resulting from an accident and those suffering from a trauma (often incurred in the past). This trauma often presented in their lives as PTSD, depression, anxiety and, in some cases, physical discomfort and/or pain. Irrespective of the nature of the injury, the outcomes realised by kiritaki resulting from rongoā Māori were multi-dimensional, intergenerational and life changing.

### Taha Tinana

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#### *Recovery from injury*

The following stories highlight how rongoā Māori supported kiritaki in recovering from physical injuries. These kiritaki shared how rongoā Māori helped reduce pain, decrease reliance on medication and pain relief, enhance mobility, accelerate recovery and restore their independence. Beyond physical healing, rongoā Māori also supported their recovery from the spiritual, mental and emotional impacts of their injuries. This approach offered a culturally affirming and holistic path to healing:

*I learnt to care for my body. I was expecting my body to heal ... but you can't strengthen your body if you are injured ... so I learnt to take care of my body, to love my body and give my body time to heal ... once I was settled mentally I was okay that I couldn't walk properly ... and that's where the patience come from, the healing (Wahine, Māori (2), 36-45yrs).*

The next story was shared by a kiritaki who sustained significant injuries in a serious car accident. She reflects on her journey to regain mobility, avoid further surgeries and reduce her reliance on pain medication:

*When I came out of hospital, I chose to do it the hard way and try not to use Codeine and Tramadol and all those pills and try and keep my organs healthy as my arms and legs and everything was all completely damaged, shattered. But there were no guarantees of me being out of a wheelchair. So, I worked with a physio in the pools twice a week, chiropractor twice a week trying to loosen up my body and the nervous system and all that kind of stuff. And it just really got to a depression stage of nothing's working, where do I go further than this?*

*And I met someone who said 'girl, you just need a mirimiri' and I'm like, cool, what's that? I'm in for anything ... so after my first mirimiri I walked out an hour later going, what? I'm never doing that again! That is horrible! That was painful! My god but to not have pain everyday lasted almost a week ... and I was going weekly at the start and when it came to my appointment, I was like, I need this. I have to go ... it built my mental strength ... if you can handle this physically, you can handle anything outside the doors and what you're about to face.*

Mirimiri helped increase circulation in her hip and legs which meant she did not need to have a full hip replacement:

*They [medical professionals] didn't have much confidence that I would have blood circulation in my hip, that I would have to have a hip replacement. But they thought that I'm young enough to see how it goes. So, I walked in and said to my rongoā practitioner that they were going to do an assessment on whether I need a hip replacement in a month can you help me? And she said, 'of course get on the table'. I also had no feeling in my knee, my knee was constantly buckling when I walked, I have a reconstructed elbow, that's all metal so I had no feeling through that and within the first four sessions I had feeling back in my arm and leg. I went for my assessment and the specialist said, 'you've got enough blood circulation in your hip. You don't need the hip surgery'.*

*So now after three and a half years, I'm not taking Panadol or Ibuprofen or Tramadol, I don't need to take it anymore ... there may be nerve damage pains that I still have, but I try and manage it (Wahine, Māori (11), 36-45yrs).*

This kiritaki is still rebuilding her life while navigating the physical, mental and emotional challenges resulting from her accident. She has cautiously taken on part-time, light work to assess her cognitive and stress levels, reconnected with her Māori identity through te reo Māori classes, and is gradually regaining confidence in contributing to her whānau again. She credits mirimiri as a pivotal factor in her recovery, aiding her healing both physically and spiritually.

Other kiritaki who experienced physical injuries also attested to rongoā Māori (mirimiri) contributing to a reduction in pain and quicker recovery:

*I surprised probably all of my physios and specialists by having quite a quick recovery ... I healed really well, and I healed faster than they expected, and I was able to return to normal faster than they would've anticipated as a standard timeframe for most people with that particular injury (Wahine, European (13), 36-45yrs).*

*So, I couldn't walk before the mirimiri, she was massaging my ACL, my leg. I was in crutches, and I had a brace on and everything and then she did her magic and my knee and my leg slowly came right ... she was very patient with me, so it was awesome. I actually believed in it but there were people when I was telling them, oh I'm getting mirimiri and they were like, 'don't do it. It's not good for you'. But I didn't listen to them. I'm glad because I'm walking now, I couldn't walk before I had lost the use of my leg and now, I've got it...I was doing physio but that didn't help me as much as mirimiri did, I thought mirimiri was a lot more helpful, it helped with the inflammation and the swelling and getting mobile again, it was a life changer (Wahine, Māori (10), 36-45yrs).*

*I had a knee replacement, and they took all the trauma and all that out of my knee and I guess it helped with my physical recovery and the physical pain, and my mind too, I felt, I think that's the main reason I keep going back to see them. I really felt a connection and they were helping me ... yeah, just a connection. I can feel my ancestors around me when I'm on the table. But yeah, I reckon it's your mind that it really heals (Tane, Māori (12), 46-55yrs).*

## **Healing physical pain manifested through emotional trauma**

The following kiritaki experienced emotional and mental trauma that manifested as physical discomfort and pain. Mirimiri, as a holistic healing method, supported her in connecting her wairua, hinengaro and tinana, facilitating her journey towards oranga (wellbeing).

The following story comes from a wahine Māori and mother in her 40s, who had been taking medication for PTSD, anxiety and depression caused by a traumatic past event. Using mirimiri, rongoā rākau (kawakawa tea) and other natural remedies, she was able to rebuild her confidence and strength, improve her physical mobility and reduce her reliance on medication within a year. The following narrative provides a summary overview of her journey towards wellbeing:

*I suffer from PTSD, anxiety, all sorts really. And I was on 26 tablets a day. I don't take anything now ... I was sick and tired of the pain medication but through my PTSD, my shoulder would lock and then it would pull and cause tightness in my muscles, so I was just walking around with my head down with a lot of pain in my back and stuff. So, I just wanted to go a lot more natural so I could have a clear mind ... and deal with my trauma and it's been working ever since ... I've got more movement and no pain in my shoulder anymore. My posture is way better than what it used to be.*

*... I haven't needed medication for the past year ... for my posture, my back, nothing. It's like just go and see her [rongoā practitioner] and you feel afterwards a bit yucky with all the toxins and layers coming out of you, like a bit drunk or I dunno, sick, but it's a different rewarding sort of sick where it only lasts for a little bit, but you can move freely ...*

*I look forward to going every fortnight because that is where they are going through the layers in my body that have been there from a very young age, it's those layers that keep building that I come across in everyday life, but the challenges aren't as big as they used to be ... when my anxiety gets triggered and I get that twitch in my shoulder and lower back it's not as bad as it was (Wahine, Māori (17), 36-45yrs).*

The following excerpts are further examples of how spiritual healing has helped kiritaki to overcome physical pain:

*When I first went there [rongoā practitioner] I had shoulder and neck pain and [my practitioner] would say 'I can feel it, I found your stress, it's just so knotted there'. She just worked at that particular spot and the next day I thought, oh wow, what was I stressed over? There's always something knotted somewhere and that's just because of my issues. So, I definitely do have physical problems because of my mental health issues (Wahine, European (20), 56-65yrs).*

*I think it was definitely helpful for my pain levels. I was in quite a lot of pain ... without giving you too much detail, I had a trauma and that manifested as a physical thing as well ... I'd gone from marathon running and Cross Fitting and being super fit to not being able to get out of bed. So I was in a lot of pain. So, whenever I went to and had my mirimiri, I always used to feel really good afterwards, less pain, more calm, more sort of awhi'd, I don't know the word, but I felt looked after and it made me feel safe (Wahine, European (15), 46-55yrs).*

*When I started my rongoā because I was physically in pain, she couldn't do the mirimiri so we focused more on the hauora and the wairua, bringing all that into balance ... and I'm now waiting for my body to catch up ... I'm not going through physio or anything like that because*

*there's a different approach to it and I don't like it. It's more aggressive ... whereas the rongoā Māori takes care of the whare tapawhā, we don't leave anything behind (Wahine, Māori (2), 36-45yrs).*

*At times things happen with your body, like your stomach moans, your arms twitch and things like that. And they can tell. Yeah, I was going to say it's enlightening, but it's lightening. Afterwards I always feel really good. I don't know. I used to have acupuncture for my back pain and I always felt really lighter after it for a couple of days and this is a similar feeling, but I know it's from inside me. And if I take that feeling and I go home and I have a cup of tea and lie down on the bed, I might sleep for four hours. I used to come home and walk and go in the garden and do all those things. Our conversations were let your body heal and let your mind rest (Wahine, European (5), 66-75yrs).*

The following kiritaki was carrying such a high degree of tension and mamae in his life that his body was described as a 'toka' or rock. Through mirimiri and kōrero and with time the tension was released:

*Ko te pā o te kaimirimiri ki runga i taku tinana me te mahara ake nei tētahi kōrero. Ka tīmata tērā huarahi a te mirimiri mea mai ana te kaimirimiri e hoa, ko tō tinana e rite ana ki te toka. Hoinō, nā i te wā e hīmatari ana mao, te hanga o tō tinana (Tane, Māori (18) 46-55yrs).*

The last expression of taha tinana was from a kiritaki whose rongoā practitioner was instrumental in supporting her mental wellbeing and also identifying her physical ailment:

*Mirimiri has helped me release a lot of trauma, like intergenerational trauma that obviously had come down from my whānau to me, I was holding onto pain that wasn't even mine.*

*Interviewer: So did you know that before you started mirimiri?*

*Nah, I didn't. It wasn't until she told me afterwards. I wish I could have had way more sessions than I had. I only had four or five sessions and it was not enough, especially for someone with a sensitive claim, it's not enough sessions. Massive trauma is quite deep ... And just even knowing to reach out to our ancestors and just learning all that ... and learning how to even make my own rongoā at home there just wasn't enough time ... she even knew that I had endometriosis through the mirimiri because she is working with the whole body (Wahine Māori (8) 36-45yrs).*

## **Taha Māori**

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Kiritaki who identified as Māori strengthened their taha Māori through rongoā Māori. In some cases, kiritaki were exploring and deepening their understanding of te ao Māori and their Māori identity which led them to choose rongoā Māori as a pathway:

*I was having a big look inside myself, who I was, and I was doing a lot of whakapapa research over Covid ... and I started to see a lot of superpowers within te ao Māori ... and I didn't really know what it meant to know where you are from, is to know who you are. And so I think that was the reason I reached out as I know a lot of our cultural strengths and abilities ... I hadn't been blessed enough to be brought up with Māori, but dare I say, don't let me bring colonisation and assimilation into it but I thought I was responsible to reach out, see what those services were going to offer me. And it was over and above just trying to strengthen a muscle and get me back out the door to mahi (Tane, Māori (4) 36-45yrs).*

For other kiritaki, rongoā Māori has inspired them to rediscover their identity as Māori through karakia, rongoā rākau, te reo Māori and whakapapa:

*I've grounded myself to be proud to be Māori again and to have that connection and now I can just share that with the next generation, so they have that understanding as well (Wahine, Māori (17) 36-45yrs).*

*We use rongoā Māori now ia ra ia ra kei roto i te whare. My practitioner basically pointed me back to what I needed. So going back to my whakapapa, my tīpuna, so reconnecting back into what we need as Māori. We use a lot of rongoā, lots of kawakawa, listening, going to the ocean, just quite deep. I think that brought a lot of peace (Wahine, Māori (2) 36-45yrs).*

*We didn't know anything about rongoā Māori. Never experienced it, never heard about it or anything like that ... I know my nan, she brought us up on the marae, the tikanga and that was there, but she chose to bring us up in te ao Pākehā to make it easy for us ... I went on to learn reo, I had to see whether I could do a course ... I love singing waiata and karakia ... but just getting the connection and what it actually means to you and why you sing a song ... yeah, it's real beautiful. And that's just the start of it (Wahine Māori (11) 46-55yrs).*

*I think mirimiri worked better for me being a Māori myself. I believed in it ... she taught me a few things about being Māori and basically being back in touch with Mother Earth and nature and having all of that spiritual side, that awareness (Wahine Māori (10) 36-45yrs).*

## Taha Whānau

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Taha whānau examines social wellbeing, focusing on how rongoā Māori supported kiritaki in reconnecting with and contributing to their whānau and/or community. The impact varies depending on the nature of each injury and circumstance. For one kiritaki, family and whānau had been the source of their trauma, resulting in a complete disconnection from them. For another, trauma had led to an isolated life with limited social connections. However, through rongoā Māori, particularly the guidance and encouragement of their practitioner, they were able to take small but meaningful steps toward feeling safer and more connected in their communities:

*I was locked in the house basically because I was too scared to go out. I was too scared to go anywhere, too scared to go to the shop and that was my life. So, two years now I actually go to the shop. My life is worth living now (Wahine, European (21) 56-65yrs).*

*When I was on my meds I had antisocial problems, so I had to go through therapy because I wouldn't even go grocery shopping, I wouldn't talk to people on the phone. I just wouldn't answer, but now I understand how my body works and clearing the pain you're more confident, you're more social (Wahine, Māori (17) 36-45yrs).*

Another significant outcome of mirimiri was reconnecting to those whānau members who had passed. Several kiritaki talked about how they felt the presence of others with them in the room which brought them great comfort:

*I'm a very spiritual person and that works well because we quite often have my dad and my nanny with me. She goes, 'oh, your dad's here' or 'you've got visitors today' so it's very spiritual (Wahine, European (21) 56-65yrs).*

For other kiritaki, rongoā Māori had contributed significantly to helping them feel positive, strong and pain-free. This transformation enabled them to become more engaged and supportive as grandparents, parents, partners and whānau members:

*I think with any kind of trauma you can see it through the family and so being able to release that kind of mamae in a safe space meant that depression wasn't coming through, anxiety wasn't coming through so I was able to just chill with my kids and just be me and not a ball of mess if you want to say that, so yeah, that's how I see it's impacted my whānau is they get mum back. But I just wish there was more time, I feel like Māori medicine, it doesn't have a time, it's not on Western timelines (Wahine, Māori (6) 36-45yrs).*

*I'm really connected with my whānau again instead of being distant or sore or grumpy (Wahine, Māori (17) 36-45yrs).*

Being able to have whānau share in their recovery journey was also an important outcome:

*For me it was about balancing that where tapawhā and I think that's what Māori services are trying to achieve. So the flow on effect has been very humbling. I'm very grateful and blessed that I have been able to take what I took away from there. Not performing the mirimiri or romiromi on my whānau but just having them share my own emotional state, my mental state, my physical wellness, and what I believe I could achieve after coming out of several weeks of being around a service that should have been there for the last 200 years (Tane, Māori (4) 36-45yrs).*

For those with whānau and family members around them, this process helped them become more functional, engaged and effective family members:

*Overall, it has had a really positive outflow to me, being able to function for my family, to be able to return to work more effectively, my happiness was significantly increased by not being held back for longer. And I think just from a healing management perspective, I probably was a happier person too because of the treatment I was receiving and feeling confident and comfortable that I was doing the right things and I had the right support (Wahine, European (13) 36-45yrs).*

## **Taha Hinengaro**

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Taha hinengaro reflects the stories of kiritaki who experienced growth in confidence, independence and mental and emotional resilience. Many shared how they learned to incorporate meditation and mindfulness practices to calm their minds and promote relaxation:

*With my mirimiri I can now walk into a shop and not trigger my anxiety ... I am able to get into a better mindset, my brain's not running fast, so I can actually think more clearly. I take my mindfulness more seriously and I think it's all linked ... So I'm living fairly normally (Wahine, European (21), 56-65yrs).*

*I've been injured for six years now and suffer from PTSD and depression, and I have been on painkillers for years. The painkillers that I'm taking also contribute to the Pākehā things that I'm suffering from ... So rongoā Māori has helped me stop all that stuff. Yeah. It was doing my head in (Tane, Māori (8) 46-55yrs).*

Several kiritaki experienced PTSD symptoms, which often led to triggers resulting in panic attacks, sleep disturbances, anxiety, fear and isolation. Some also described holding tension, anger,

frustration and fear in their tinana. However, after participating in multiple mirimiri sessions, they experienced a release of tension from their bodies, feeling much lighter afterwards. For the first time in their lives, they reported being better able to identify and manage their PTSD:

*Mirimiri has decreased the panic attacks immensely. The attacks, when I said I was probably waking up like five nights a week maybe now in the last six months I've probably had three PTSD attacks because I wasn't aware of the triggers. And now that I see it and then ponder on it during the day, it doesn't come back and hit me at night (Wahine, Māori (5), 66-75yrs).*

*I had PTSD, anxiety and stress which is no fun. And so when I started there was a lot of work on mindfulness and calming my brain. So she worked sort of deeper into that part of it. I don't know what it's called but it's helped me tremendously. My anxiety is probably about 40% easier than what it was when I first started, so I just can't recommend it high enough ... I tell everyone to go (Wahine, European (20), 56-65 yrs).*

## Taha Wairua

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The impact on wairua was an experience felt by all kiritaki, regardless of their injury, though it was often the most difficult aspect for them to articulate:

*I get a lot of the spiritual healing at the same time. So it just means that I can step outside of myself and let healing be. It's very hard to describe because it's ethereal. It's hard to put it into words because it works on so many levels (Wahine, European (20) 56-65yrs).*

Most kiritaki described an overwhelming sense of relief after their mirimiri sessions, feeling 'lighter' as though a weight had been lifted. They reported feeling clearer, calmer and more content. With each visit, they felt physically stronger and more resilient to the triggers that had previously been disabling. Some kiritaki also described experiences of connecting with loved ones who had passed, which they viewed as a form of healing. One kiritaki shared how rongoā Māori helped her link her emotions with her physical being, supporting her overall healing journey:

*When I experienced pain I detach from my body, I knew that happened but I don't know when I am doing it so they gave me techniques to stay centred ... I have been able to feel, I experienced what anger felt like for the first time, I had been angry in the past but I didn't know where anger sits in your body and when you are experiencing it, same with sadness, I had cried in the past but I have never sat in it and really felt it (Wahine, Māori (16) 36-45yrs).*

Often, the physical discomfort kiritaki presented to the practitioner was not the area that was worked on. Instead, the practitioner demonstrated a powerful ability to identify and relieve the pressure points where trauma was stored. Through this process, the practitioner helped kiritaki gain a deeper understanding of their bodies and how trauma was affecting them:

*I may be going for my elbow and she'll just take that on and in the session she's not even touching my elbow. But then I walk out feeling good and refreshed all round somehow ... when I go in there, I'll just zonk out ... I almost need a hug when I'm leaving. It's a weird thing ... it has a calming effect on me. I have tried physio and acupuncture, and they are great but I'm not getting the feels that I am from when I go see [rongoā practitioner] ... It's better than good ... I'm going there for that injury, but then I think I'm getting much more (Tane, European (7) 36-45yrs).*

*I don't buy into the spiritual side of it, but for me it was kind of symbolic and I feel like that's what really helped ... I was in such a fragile place ... and when they were doing the karakia*

*and they were saying things like, the darkness is leaving, and it was just really nice to be able to visualise that darkness leaving my body because up until that point I was medicated. I was having talk therapy, I wasn't in a good place ... and that was the part where I was able to really start to let go of stuff ... so it's not just about your emotional, mental, physical wellbeing. It's that spiritual thing as well. And even though I'm an atheist, I still have energy. I still have this, I guess spirituality, so yeah, I guess I'd use rongoā Māori to stay on the wagon really. Just to check in with myself and make sure I'm living authentically, really (Wahine, European (10) 46-55yrs).*

For one kiritaki, the recovery journey is expected to be lifelong, but each session is helping to restore her wairua and improve her quality of life:

*So the spiritual side was what I really needed and I needed to tap into that, but I didn't know I needed it because I didn't tell anyone about my childhood sexual abuse until I retired. It was really one of those delayed things that when you're busy, busy, busy with your life and you keep everything snapped down until you try to go to sleep. So lack of sleep was the big thing. I didn't know why I was waking up in terror until I started to really remember through counselling, and mirimiri really helped me spiritually (Wahine, European (5) 66-75yrs).*

## **Taha Whenua**

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Taha whenua can be understood as both a sense of belonging and connection to place, as well as a reconnection to the taiao. This outcome was particularly evident among kiritaki who identified as Māori. Many shared stories of how their experience with rongoā Māori helped them reconnect with the taiao, including the use of plant-based remedies such as kawakawa, kumarahou and tūpākihi. They also spoke of the significance of wai in their healing process and expressed a deep call to reconnect with their ancestral lands.

## **Summary**

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In summary, rongoā Māori has had a positive impact on all kiritaki interviewed. For those who had experienced trauma, the spiritual healing of mirimiri helped them begin the process of releasing their trauma, enabling them to better manage their mental and emotional wellbeing and live fuller, happier lives. Kiritaki also learned how to care for their whole bodies to reduce further injury. In addition, kiritaki Māori were reconnecting with te reo Māori and cultural practices relating to health and wellbeing which inspired them to continue to deepen their understanding of, and connection to, te ao Māori. Ultimately, however, rongoā Māori as a holistic remedy was contributing significantly to their quality of life.

## Rongoā Māori and universal services

This section is focused on how rongoā Māori outcomes compare to outcomes achieved through universal services. The research found that the main difference between outcomes achieved through universal services and rongoā Māori was the holistic and spiritual nature of the outcome. Universal services generally focused on a specific injury whereas rongoā Māori not only addressed the injury the kiritaki were presenting with but also relieved (where relevant) physical pain, mental stress, anxiety and social isolation resulting from trauma. Kiritaki Māori also felt more connected to te ao Māori, to loved ones and to their own cultural identity through rongoā Māori, which was not an outcome realised through universal services. Furthermore, and as noted in the [taha tinana](#) section above, a small group of kiritaki with physical injuries felt that rongoā Māori was more effective in pain reduction and accelerated their recovery more effectively than other strategies they had used.

Some kiritaki however were continuing to use Western-based approaches (universal services) to support their recovery, including physiotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, counselling, meditation and mindfulness, acupuncture, herbal remedies and medicines. These kiritaki had a strong belief and confidence in both healing approaches:

*I think that both Māori and Western approaches together are a good mix for me personally ... I like the evidence-based stuff. So, I like to have medication, and I like to have a psychologist. I like to have a diagnosis, and I like to feel a bit more under control ... but I felt like everything was so out of control. So, once I got on top of that and was able to think straight, that was when I was able to go that little bit further with rongoā Māori ... Almost like from surviving to thriving in a way. Yeah. It's kind of hard to explain, but I just think that they work well together (Wahine, European, (15) 46-55yrs).*

*I'm using both therapies. So, working on the head and the mirimiri does the body ... I would say they complement each other (Wahine, European (20), 56-65yrs).*

However, other kiritaki had lost confidence in Western approaches which they considered were either ineffective in supporting recovery or the side effects of Western medicines were having a detrimental effect on their health:

*So, you have rongoā Māori, then you've got the Western, Pākehā side that just gives pills and sends you to a psychologist like a bandaid. That's all. Western medicine actually is just a bandaid for issues. Prior to my accident I was quite heavily towards the Pākehā side, but since my accident, I've stepped more into my culture, my identity as Māori ... that's where rongoā Māori has helped (Tane, Māori, (26) 36-45yrs).*

One kiritaki for example shared his experience of accessing mainstream services (counsellor) nearly ten years ago to support his wellbeing. While this helped him to some extent, he was seeking a whakaaro Māori response, which was not available through ACC at that time. Since then, he has since used a range of rongoā Māori to support his mental and physical wellbeing, with ongoing support from ACC:

*Nō reira, koinā ngā tino rongoā i aru atu ana au i roto i ngā tau. Kōrero, wānanga, whakawhanaungatanga, te hakamahi i tēnei mea te tikanga Māori anō he rongoā Māori, ā, mirimiri me ngā rongoā nei kawakawa, ērā tūrākau katoa. Me te mea nei, me te haere ki ētahi o ō tātou whanaunga e matakite ana, e tohunga ana rātou ki te kite i te ao i tua. Āe, me te mea nei whakaae te ACC ki tērā (Tane, Māori (18) 46-55yrs).*

Other factors impacting on kiritaki experiencing a positive outcome from rongoā Māori include a strong belief in the healing properties of rongoā Māori. Without this belief some kiritaki felt that the outcomes experienced could be limited. The other significant contributing factor is the rongoā practitioner, including their practice and the safe environment they create for kiritaki to embrace their healing journey.

## Te Kāpehu Whetū and opportunities to improve

As outlined in the previous section, there is a strong alignment between kiritaki outcomes and those described in Te Kāpehu Whetū (see also Figure 1). The following discussion will address each outcome—Wairua me te mauri, Tuakiritanga, Puāwaitanga, Rangatiratanga and Mana Motuhake—highlighting areas of alignment and identifying opportunities where ACC policies and practices could be improved. While the framework is based on whānau outcomes, these have been analysed in the context of individual kiritaki outcomes.

### Wairua me te mauri

**Table 3** | The extent to which the outcome *wairua me te mauri* has been met

Outcome	Indicators of the outcome	How well has the outcome been achieved?
Wairua me te mauri	Wairua of the whānau is prioritised and elevated	Outcome met very well for all kiritaki
	Mauri of whānau is prioritised and elevated	
	Whānau experience positive and supportive relationships	

The majority of kiritaki reported a positive impact on their wairua as a result of engaging with rongoā Māori. This impact was holistic and often exceeded anything they had experienced through Western health systems. Kiritaki described feeling lighter and stronger, which also positively influenced their mauri and mana. They shared experiences of reconnecting with their emotions, releasing deeply held trauma and pain, building confidence and self-esteem, fostering positive relationships, and ultimately leading happier lives.

### Tuakiritanga

**Table 4** | The extent to which the outcome *tuakiritanga* has been met

Outcome	Indicators of the outcome	How well has the outcome been achieved?
Tuakiritanga	Whānau live as Māori	Outcome met very well for kiritaki Māori and, where relevant, all kiritaki
	Whānau experience services as Māori	
	Te ao Māori worldviews and preferences are prioritised	
	Whānau are connected and belong, their tūrangawaewae is strong and enduring	
	From whakamā to whakamana	

All kiritaki experienced a service that was deeply embedded in te ao Māori. Practitioners were skilled in connecting with each kiritaki in ways that guided them safely through the healing process, ensuring that both Māori and non-Māori benefited from rongoā Māori.

Kiritaki who identified as Māori experienced a service that celebrated and valued Māori cultural identity, strengthened their connection to te ao Māori, and reaffirmed the importance of living as and being Māori. Many Māori kiritaki shared that they had not been raised in te ao Māori, with

limited exposure to te reo and tikanga Māori, and some were raised away from their tūrangawaewae, leading to feelings of disconnection from their tuakiri Māori. However, rongoā Māori offered them a pathway to rediscover themselves and engage more deeply in Māori cultural practices.

Kiritaki shared transformative experiences, including increased engagement with te reo Māori (such as enrolling in te reo Māori courses), tikanga Māori, karakia, whakapapa (including reconnections with loved ones who had passed), atua Māori, and a renewed connection to their tūrangawaewae and the taiao. At least three kiritaki interviewed had completed rongoā Māori training through Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, practiced aspects of rongoā Māori through intergenerational learning, or expressed a strong desire to deepen their knowledge of various rongoā Māori modalities. Additionally, some kiritaki were embedding rongoā Māori practices into their daily lives, including karakia, pure, whakawātea and rongoā rākau. This holistic integration not only supported their healing but also enriched their cultural identity and everyday wellbeing.

Non-Māori kiritaki developed a deeper appreciation of Māori worldviews through their engagement with rongoā Māori, often relating these experiences to their own lives and upbringing.

For those who had not previously experienced rongoā Māori, there was initially a sense of apprehension during their first engagement. However, this apprehension quickly dissipated as they built trust and a sense of safety with their practitioner. This growing confidence allowed kiritaki to open their hearts and minds to the process, fostering a strong belief in the effectiveness and power of traditional Māori healing systems.

**Puāwaitanga**

**Table 5 |** The extent to which the outcome *puāwaitanga* has been met

Outcome	Indicators of the outcome	How well has the outcome been achieved?
Puāwaitanga	Whānau experience intergenerational healing	Outcome met very well for all kiritaki
	Taha wairua, taha whānau, taha tinana, taha hinengaro, and taha whenua are in balance	
	Whānau are safe and secure	
	Whānau experience healthy and supportive environments	

These outcomes have been described in the Puāwaitanga section, specifically across taha wairua, taha whānau, taha tinana, taha hinengaro, taha whenua, and, in some cases, intergenerational healing. Kiritaki appreciated their practitioner’s ability to identify what was needed to restore balance in their lives. Whānau felt safe and supported throughout the process, and all kiritaki either recommended, or expressed a willingness to recommend, rongoā Māori to friends and family. The practice was delivered in a healthy, nurturing and supportive environment, further enhancing its effectiveness and accessibility.

## Rangatiratanga

**Table 6** | The extent to which the outcome *rangatiratanga* has been met

Outcome	Indicators of the outcome	How well has the outcome been achieved?
Rangatiratanga	Whānau exercise authority to make their own decisions about their preferred outcomes and care solutions	Outcome met well for most kiritaki
	Whānau are respected and treated with dignity	
	Whānau are valued and listened to	
	Whānau voice is privileged	

The majority of kiritaki experienced the dimensions of rangatiratanga through their rongoā Māori journey. However, two kiritaki encountered experiences that fell short of their expectations. One felt their mirimiri session was rushed, leaving them deflated, while the other was not able to book a specific practitioner and had to see whoever was available, as dictated by the provider's practice model. In both instances, the kiritaki felt their views were not respected or listened to. Despite these isolated experiences, both kiritaki maintained their respect for rongoā Māori as a valued and effective healing system.

Overall, most kiritaki felt valued, listened to, and treated with respect and dignity. They experienced a sense of control over the healing process until they developed trust and confidence in their practitioner, at which point they felt comfortable allowing the practitioner to guide their wellbeing journey.

In contrast, kiritaki did not experience rangatiratanga when engaging with Western health systems. Some felt they were being talked to rather than engaged with, leaving them unable to express their needs or feel heard. While many kiritaki acknowledged the value of medications such as pain relief, anti-depressants and anti-anxiety treatments for managing immediate issues, they viewed these as short-term solutions rather than ideal or sustainable options. As a result, they sought more natural and therapeutic remedies that could be integrated into their lives as long-term approaches to supporting their wellbeing:

*I wasn't able to really gain traction. And the difference was they didn't really know whether they were healing my muscle to be able to help me utilise it, I had a knee reconstruction and I got more medication, Tramadol, Panadol, Diclofenac. I had to recommend through the system what I thought was going to be best for me. And they're supposed to be the people with all of the knowledge in the Western world and understand our body with all the science behind it. But I simply wasn't getting enough progression. If anything, it wasn't stimulating just staying on physio (Tane, Māori (4) 36-56yrs).*

Another benefit of rongoā Māori was that kiritaki felt they could access the service without fear of judgement. The locations were generally<sup>8</sup> private, safe and comfortable. Practitioners often incorporated waiata, sound, karakia and kōrero into their sessions, creating a holistic and culturally affirming experience. In some cases, more than one practitioner participated in a session, or different practitioners administered the rongoā, but this was always undertaken with the prior approval of the kiritaki. Additionally, some kiritaki chose to have family members present during their sessions for

<sup>8</sup> One provider operated their practice in an open space.

support. For one kiritaki living in a small town, visiting a rongoā Māori practitioner meant that it was difficult for others to know what she was being treated for, further maintaining her privacy:

*There's a lot of issues around just having an appointment and an appointment place where I didn't want the people that I know in the community to know that I was having the counselling. Anyway, I'm really happy and proud to walk into where I go and have mirimiri, there's a massive difference than trying to find a park and someone say, "oh, you're going to the counsellor, whatcha going to see her for?" on the street. So I noticed that, I mean a couple of times I've even told a stranger that I just met on the street what I was going to do and I didn't say why (Wahine, European (5) 66-75yrs).*

## Mana motuhake

**Table 7** | The extent to which the outcome *mana motuhake* has been met

Outcome	Indicators of the outcome	How well has the outcome been achieved?
Mana Motuhake	Whānau who wish to be more independent can be	Outcome somewhat met for most kiritaki
	Whānau live their lives as they determine	
	Whānau have the resources they need to thrive	
	Whānau have choices and options	

Kiritaki were generally very positive about their experience of rongoā Māori, their practitioner and their ACC case manager (recovery team member). However, the most suggested areas for improvement centred on increasing information, awareness and access to rongoā Māori. These factors are seen as crucial in enabling kiritaki to make informed decisions about their recovery. These insights have been grouped under the Mana Motuhake outcome, as they directly relate to kiritaki feeling empowered with control and autonomy over their recovery process.

### Awareness and information

A common theme amongst kiritaki was their awareness of rongoā Māori as a recovery option funded through ACC. All kiritaki were informed of rongoā Māori as an option for their recovery (physical or mental) only after they had tried other universal services that did not fully meet their needs. Most kiritaki were unaware that rongoā Māori was funded by ACC. Many discovered rongoā Māori through personal connections, such as friends or other health practitioners or, in some cases, through their ACC case manager:

*I don't think I found out about rongoā Māori through ACC specifically ... so maybe some more information would've been helpful to even let me know that it existed (Wahine, European (13) 36-45yrs).*

*I rang a lady because I was looking for mirimiri and she told me about ACC and so that's where my journey went because that's what I was looking for. But I didn't know ACC already offered it ... I know heaps of people that are unaware of it (Wahine, Māori (2), 36-45yrs).*

*I don't know how to put it but it needs to be spoken of more to become an option ... it needs to be put out there more to be able to help because not everyone fits in that square box. I had no clue. I wish I knew years ago ... So I mean that's unfortunate. I don't think a lot of whānau know because I actually had one of the ladies I work with, she's through ACC as well,*

*and she didn't realise that you can ask for more and how to apply (Wahine, Māori (17), 36-45yrs).*

Kiritaki felt more information could be made available and accessible to support their decision-making process.

### *Autonomy*

Kiritaki with long-term injuries often felt disempowered by the process of reapplying for funded sessions through ACC and the uncertainty of whether their application would be approved. Many were unclear about how the number of rongoā Māori sessions they were eligible for was determined, how they could apply for additional sessions, or whether their sessions would be covered by ACC funding. Despite having the option to engage with rongoā Māori, kiritaki frequently felt that the decision on whether they could continue using rongoā Māori as part of their recovery process was out of their control:

*I was really unsure of how many sessions I was allowed to have and I felt like it wasn't a smooth process, there was not really that much communication of "okay, you get two", I give this form to the lady, she fills it out and then I don't know, I didn't know how many sessions I could have and could they pay for my petrol out there. I didn't really get told any answers ... that would've really helped (Wahine, Māori (6) 36-45yrs).*

*I was using [rongoā Māori] consistently, but every time I'd go past the limit they'd have to reapply for more funding. That's one of the big things that I find quite frustrating with ACC is that you have to keep reapplying, especially when you're in a state like me because I'm a permanent fixture for ACC (Tane, Māori (26) 36-45yrs).*

The uncertainty surrounding the process and not knowing who determines continued access to rongoā Māori created significant stress and anxiety for kiritaki, especially for those with sensitive claims. This lack of clarity added to the emotional burden, as kiritaki felt powerless in managing their recovery journey and were unsure about the sustainability of their access to essential rongoā Māori services. The following kiritaki shared their experience of the impact of no longer receiving ACC funded rongoā Māori and the helplessness and anger they felt towards ACC not knowing why the service had come to an end and therefore why they had to now pay for rongoā Māori; a cost considered unaffordable:

*I can't afford it<sup>9</sup> [rongoā Māori], so I'm going to lose it, which is really very upsetting for me, but there's nothing I can do about it ... I was able to kind of scrape the money together for a few months, but I've got to use my food money. I'm on a really limited budget ... For me, it's a lifelong thing, my injury has caused so much pain and damage and I've got to live with it for the rest of my life. So for me it's lifelong, which is why it's so upsetting that I'm going to miss out on that exquisite healing...it's just not fair (Wahine, European (20) 56-65yrs).*

### *Access*

Access to rongoā Māori practitioners, both in terms of availability and location, was challenging for some kiritaki. For instance, some had to travel over 40 minutes by car to reach the practitioner, which made the cost of petrol difficult to sustain. Another kiritaki highlighted that rongoā Māori

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<sup>9</sup> The kiritaki was under the impression a levy of \$40 was imposed by ACC but this is incorrect. It is likely the kiritaki is now paying the fee charged by the rongoā practitioner.

served as a valuable alternative, especially given the scarcity of Māori psychologists and counsellors, emphasising its importance in providing culturally relevant support:

*Nō reira, mōhio ahau, arā tērā taha, ko te hiahia au ki te kōrero atu ki tētahi tangata Māori...e mōhio ana ki te reo Māori, tua atu i tērā kāhore au e hiahia ki te noho ko te mea... ko te reo Māori nahe nei anō e pēhea tana mōhiotanga ki ngā āhuatanga kaupapa Māori nei, nā e aru atu, e āta aru atu ana au ki tēnei mea te rongoā Māori (Tane, Māori (18) 46-55yrs).*

Additional feedback for improvements included the suggestion that ACC consider funding a broader range of traditional activities such as raranga (traditional Māori weaving practice) which supports mindfulness, working alongside others, and in some cases the opportunity to contribute to a collective kaupapa. Kiritaki also expressed a desire for more proactive contact from ACC, with regular check-ins to assess whether they needed further support and to create opportunities for them to provide feedback on their recovery journey. This would help ongoing engagement and allow kiritaki to feel more involved in decisions regarding their treatment and care.

## Conclusion

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Kiritaki have been extremely generous in sharing their personal stories, insights and experiences, highlighting the positive impact that rongoā Māori has had on their lives. The benefits of rongoā Māori extend beyond addressing immediate injuries and contribute to the holistic wellbeing of kiritaki, the oranga of their whānau and families, and ultimately their contribution to society. As the number of kiritaki choosing rongoā Māori to support their recovery continues to grow rapidly, the notion of rongoā Māori as a commodity—something that can be accessed and supplied on demand—requires deeper exploration. ACC, therefore, not only has an opportunity to continue access to a healing system that works, but also to engage strategically with its rongoā Māori partners to ensure the sustainability and integrity of rongoā Māori as a taonga and ancient practice.

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