

# living long and healthy

As an intrepid swimmer, what's not to like about a seminar called Blue Zones? So even though the tide was high, the water warm and the sun blazing, I was intrigued enough to go along to a Bay of Plenty District Health Board seminar at Te Manuka Tu Tahu in early January.

There was no talk about the water, but ideas were flying from all directions about how to live a long and healthy life.

It began with the warm welcome of a powhiri by the tangata whenua, followed by a timely reminder by Pouroto Ngaropo, of the importance of the Maori holistic approach to life. Seemingly new western ideas often resonate with aspects of indigenous knowledge.

Then Blue Zone pioneer and advocate, Tony Buettner of Minnesota took the floor. Soon the health board staff and members, there in abundance, were reminded sharply of their relative impotence.

Their excellent clinical primary and secondary care is vital for managing life-shortening chronic diseases. However preventable illnesses still abound, cost us heaps and cause us to spend more years disabled and to die earlier than if we adhered to advice from health experts.

Buettner's analysis is based on studies of the Blue Zones ([www.bluezones.com](http://www.bluezones.com)). Residents of villages or small towns in various countries produce a high rate of centenarians, suffer a fraction of the diseases that commonly kill people in other parts of the developed world, and enjoy more years of good health.

The five zones are in diverse cultures: a hot spot of longevity in mountain villages in Sardinia where a substantial proportion of men reach 100, the islands of Okinawa, Japan, a group of Seventh-day Adventists who rank among North America's longest-lived people, Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica and Icaria in Greece, with low rates of cancer and heart disease, and almost no dementia.

Back at home I visited the Blue Zones website where a simple test gave me my current life expectancy (95.4 years) and healthy life expectancy (89.2). That's useful since I plan to take up a new career in five years' time. Maybe this information would even induce an employer to take me on.

I also learn that I can add 2.8 years to my life expectancy by following simple rules tailored to my current life style. The one I liked best was having a little more wine and fruit (recipes included with results). I am also instructed to join a faith community and reduce my stress. I take this to mean that my paddleboarding is now mandated.

It's New Year resolution time so I can probably manage small changes but, on the whole, Buettner says such personal efforts are more likely to succeed if underpinned by community action. He showed us unset-



tling statistics on the percentage of people who begin diets or take medication and how few continue either.

What then might induce us to emulate residents of Blue Zones and what do we need to do? There are nine commonalities found in Blue Zones. They are stress reduction, moderate physical activity and caloric intake, a plant based diet, and a modicum of wine. Along with these come life purpose, engagement in spirituality or religion, in family and social life.

Pakeha can certainly look to Maori for lessons in some of these aspects of good health. The weaving of wairua-spirituality permeates Maori culture, whanau is central to life and kaumatua have an essential role and purpose. But in other areas we are all wide of the mark.

Buettner is part of a team supporting United States communities moving towards Blue Zone healthy lifestyles. They use a myriad of approaches, such as persuading restaurants to give healthy options appealing names and prominence on their menus; and local bodies to develop more cycleways. Hundreds of such tweaks make it easier for us all to be healthy.

For a brief period I was part of a team facilitating training in health promotion. This is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and improve, their health, looking at a wide range of social and environmental interventions. Buettner's messages and solutions sound a lot like those we imparted, albeit brought together in a neat package with a good name and leader to support us to reach this nirvana.

I strongly favour healthy communities but we already have knowledge of health promotion and expertise in community development here. I don't believe we need to spend money on American experts to support us in this endeavour. It would be better spent developing a team of local leaders to guide and support us towards needed changes.

The key problem that health authorities need to fix is that there is never enough

money for health promotion. The previous government even cut back on the miniscule budget in this area.

For decades we have known how to reduce incidence of disease, yet our health system continues to put the bulk of our taxes towards fixing us when things go wrong. This is what needs to

change, along with strong leadership and a robust evidenced-based plan to trial some ideas. I'll be with the health board all the way if they can manage this. Good luck.

**HUI:** Tony Buettner, senior vice president of Blue Zones speaks to Bay of Plenty District Health Board chief executive Helen Mason, and chairwoman Sally Webb at Te Manuka Tu Tahu Marae. Photo supplied



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