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# 1769 Rewha-rewha epidemic becomes apparent

Transactions and Proceedings of the  
Society of New Zealand

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(Royal Society NZ, 1904)

Volume 37, 1904

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## EPIDEMIC DISEASES (Papa reti or Mate uruta).

Terrible decimating epidemics have at various times, but particularly during the decade 1844 to 1854, swept through the Maori villages.

In all probability infectious fevers were introduced by Europeans, prior to whose advent epidemics were never experienced, or but seldom. "It is undoubtedly a fact that so soon as Europeans arrived in New Zealand the native tribes were afflicted by very serious epidemics, which swept off great numbers of the people. They perished by thousands, many villages being almost depopulated, and many settlements were decimated on account of the scourge. Natives of several parts of the North Island have told me," says Elsdon Best, "that when the famous rewharewha was ravaging the land the dead were often so numerous that they were left in the houses unburied, while the survivors fled in terror to seek a new home elsewhere. A village known as Te Neinei, near my present camp, was so deserted, the survivors settling at Pa-puweru. Some visitors coming to Te Neinei found the dead lying in the huts, and partially consumed by rats. Epidemics of this nature are termed by the Tuhoe people papa reti, the name of a sort of toboggan formerly used by them. The dying of many people was compared with the swift motion of the toboggan down the slide. Or, as an old man explained it to me, 'Tuhoe flowed like water down to Hades.' Pio says that was on the second coming of Captain Cook that these epidemics commenced their ravages, and that they spread all over the island, numbers dying in every village. So many died that for the first time the dead were all buried near the villages. When an epidemic desolated the Rua-tahuna Valley in 1897 I was informed that the cause of the visitation was the fact that the tapu had been taken off the sacred house Te Whai-a-te-motu, at Matatua, in order that visitors might be entertained therein. The gods had punished

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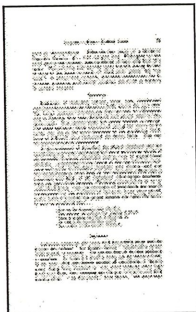


this act of pollution by sending the epidemic among the pec,

Epidemics such as influenza and dysentery were undoubtedly introduced by white sailors, and were attributed by the Maori to the displeasure of the foreigner's gods, or in some cases to the gods of the missionaries, who were supposed to be annoyed because the natives did not reject their heathen practices and the worship of the gods of their ancestors. Influenza, dysentery, coughs, certain skin affections, and venereal diseases were thus accounted for.

"The only epidemics I have heard of," says Best, "as prior to the advent of Europeans were those caused by remaining too long on a battlefield, and continued eating of human flesh in a

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state of decomposition. When the big party of a thousand Ngapuhi, Rarawa, &c., were camped near Wellington in the early part of last century, some hundreds of them died from this cause. The survivors said that the cause was the taking for fuel of some of the brush or scrub of which their priests' hut was made." It seems clear, however, that these deaths were due to ptomaine poisoning, and, strictly speaking, this is not an instance of epidemic sickness.

### **Dysentery.**

Epidemics of dysentery (tikuku, torere, koea, tikotiko-toto) were prevalent among the Maoris in 1795, and in the year 1800. The former epidemic occurred just after the visit of a European ship to Mercury Bay, near Auckland, and proved fatal in very many cases. The natives called the disease makoko, or maripa. The latter epidemic, which commenced among the natives in the north, was one of the most disastrous of the pestilences which have at different times decimated the Maori tribes. This was the above-mentioned rewharewha.

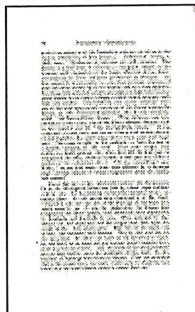
In the treatment of dysentery the Maoris obtained relief by masticating and then swallowing the leaves and tender shoots of the koromiko (*Veronica salicifolia*) and the leaf of kopata (*Geum urbanus*). A decoction of the leaves of the tutu (*Cortaria ruscifolia*) and of the li (*Cordyline australis*) were likewise used, also the tannin-bearing inner bark of the pohutukawa (*Metrosideros tomentosa*) and bark of the kawakawa (*Macropiper excelsum*), while the gum of the harakeke (*Phormium tenax*) served as an excellent demulcent. The administration of these herbs was usually accompanied by the repetition of charms to make them potent, and in cases of diarrhoea the proper karakia was called He korere. It may be translated thus:

—  
Stop up the looseness, allay the flow,  
The purging will subside, the purging is stayed.  
There is purging and there is stopping up,  
For this is the remedy that stayed  
The malady of thy ancestor Houtaiki.

## Influenza.

Influenza epidemics also came with the pakeha ships, and the disease was named "the foreign disease" (rewharewha, tarutawhiti, taiawa, or tarewha). The precise date of the first epidemic is uncertain; by some it is fixed at 1790, and by others at 1836. In the year 1844 this disease carried off multitudes of Maoris, many dying from exposure to cold while suffering from high fever, and others from jumping into the sea or river to cool their burning skins. "At this period," says Taylor, "the same complaint

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was raging in all the Australian colonies, as well as in the various settlements of New Zealand." Dieffenbach, writing in 1843, says, "Epidemics of influenza are still common. The disease is a bad form of influenza, a malignant catarrh of the bronchi, with congestion of the lungs, affection of the heart, accompanied by fever and great prostration of strength." At this period, it is interesting to note that immense numbers of dead fish were thrown up on the shores, and in a later epidemic the illness first attacked poultry and pigs and dogs, later causing many deaths in the native villages—which always swarmed with dogs and poultry. Breathlessness and severe headache were two of the most pronounced symptoms of the disease among the Maoris, as with Polynesians generally, and it was commonly called "the head-splitting disease." When influenza was very prevalent in the north, one of the Maori tohungas declared that he had found a cure for "the head-splitting disease." It was composed of roots, bark, and leaves of trees, with certain shrubs, burned together, the ashes being mixed into a paste with hogs' lard. This mess he sold to his patients in balls the size of a marble, charging £1 10s. each. They were bought with avidity by timid persons, who, when they felt the least pain in any part of the body, made an incision in that part and rubbed a portion of the compound into it. "It was astonishing," says White, "to see how many cures were affected by it amongst those nervous persons in whose imagination alone the disease had existed."

About the end of the eighteenth century the Kaurapaoa. Pa on the Whanganui River was held by about eight hundred natives when the devastating rewharewhā epidemic broke out among them. An old native thus described it to Mr. Best: "Friend, I will now tell you of the first sign of the white man which came to us. It was the rewharewha, the disease that slaughtered the Maori people, until thousands were represented by hundreds, and hundreds by tens. When attacked by that disease, for one night and one day might man look upon the world of life: then death came. Men did not die singly, but in tens, and twenties, and thirties. Day by day and day by day they died. No effort was made by the survivors to mourn for the dead, or to carry out our ancient burial customs, for a great fear was upon them. And the hearts of the living breathed not as they looked upon the multitude of the dead. So the children of Paerangi went down to Hades. Then the survivors. fled to the ranges, and a

war party which came to attack the fort found only the dead  
therein, many of whom they ate."

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