

The oral history of the role of Mere Harper and Ria Tikini in the origins of Plunket



Nā Reverend Wendy Heath, descendant of Mere Harper (great-great-great granddaughter)

The oral history of the huge contribution of Mere Harper and Ria Tikini to the origins of Plunket was well known among our Tipuna alive at that time and was often spoken of and passed on through people such as Aunty Mahana Walsh (nee Te Tau) whose parents were contemporaries of Mere and Ria.

As the local midwives, they identified issues that meant babies were failing to thrive especially when breast milk from mothers with nutrition issues was not meeting the needs of the child.

While they consulted with Truby King on these pēpi, the work and information gathering was done by these Māori women.

They were completely left out of the Plunket narrative and given no recognition of their huge contribution to the origins of the organization.

This was not unexpected in the historical context of the time. The tendency to misogyny in that era is well-known. Māori contributions and service to the nation were also ignored and went unacknowledged. For example most people to this day are not aware of the service of Māori in World War I, where many Māori served with distinction in the Assault Pioneer Battalion.

The possibility of highlighting Māori achievement in the context of that era was extremely low and being female as well made it nigh unheard of, to the point that I doubt Mere and Ria ever even expected any acknowledgement.

This did not however justify the ongoing refusal to give credit where it is due. This lack of acknowledgement was a matter of significant anger amongst their descendants who have always been aware that without these two midwives Plunket may not have existed.

When a descendant of Mere Harper became the CEO of Whānau Āwhina Plunket the whānau felt the time was right to correct the historical record of Plunket's origins.

None have denied that Dr Truby King played a key role in this history however to award absolutely all the credit to him is inaccurate and unjust, and denied these forward thinking women the recognition they deserved. They worked tirelessly for the improved health of babies and while they accepted being relegated to invisibility in the work and the subsequent Plunket organisation, their descendants did not and will not accept the narrative that denies them their rightful place.

Their whānau has always known the truth and the knowledge has been passed down the four generations of descendants. We have always been proud of their amazing contribution to a wonderful organization. We know that this historical truth has not been widely known outside of the whānau and people of Te Rūnaka o Puketeraki and is new information to most, however that does not change the validity of this knowledge and our whakapapa.

