

Policy Statement

Health research conducted in the Cook Islands is subject to the Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health Cook Islands (TMO) Research Policy and Procedures. Emerging and established researchers undertaking health research in the Cook Islands are advised to read this policy and align their research to the health priority areas identified by TMO below.

This policy provides guidelines to ensure all health research conducted in the Cook Islands is:

- Ethical
- Has scientific merit
- Translates into better health outcomes for the Cook Islands population

Collaborative research between TMO, national and international researchers, and their host institutions is encouraged to build capacity and capability within the Cook Islands health and research workforce.

Scope

This policy applies to all TMO employees, national and international researchers (including visiting medical officers, health professionals, and students) intending to undertake empirical research or databased research utilising TMO health data and resources.

Host institutions of researchers are responsible for ensuring their researchers are aware of and apply these guidelines prior to undertaking research in the Cook Islands. TMO will seek redress of researcher non-compliance with this policy with host institutions.

Guiding Principles

1. Ethical Integrity

All health research conducted in Cook Islands must adhere to the highest ethical standards, ensuring the dignity, rights, and welfare of research participants.

2. Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in research processes, methodologies, and findings is essential to foster trust and credibility within the scientific community and society. Researchers, administrators, and all involved parties are accountable for upholding the principles outlined in this policy.

3. Cultural Respect and Sensitivity

All health research must respect and comply with applicable legislation, regulations, guidelines, and cultural protocols in the Cook Islands.

4. Participant Welfare and Informed Consent

Informed consent is fundamental to ethical research. Researchers must ensure that research participants in the Cook Islands have access to either English or Cook Islands Maori information sheets or participant consent forms. Researchers must attach ethics approval and any conditions from accredited international institutional ethics committees.

5. Intellectual Property and Data Ownership

Researchers must clearly state in their consent forms how they will use, store and destroy the raw data collected from participants, including visual documentation. Ownership of the data must be addressed transparently. Depending on the agreed arrangement with the researcher, TMO shall reserve the right to store data collected and visual documentation in adherence with government official information management policies.

6. Confidentiality and Privacy

Images of identifiable participants are not to be copyright, and confidentiality measures must be strictly followed in data management and dissemination.

7. Research Integrity and Accountability

The TMO Research Committee is responsible for investigating reported health research misconduct and complaints. Conflicts of interest must be disclosed prior to the undertaking of the research; managed well and documented.

8. Dissemination and Reciprocity

Researchers must attach a dissemination plan outlining how they will disseminate research findings to research participants, their communities, and TMO. Open access to research findings is encouraged, and reciprocal research relationships between researchers and participants are encouraged, including appropriate acknowledgment and reciprocity gestures such as monetary gifts or vouchers.

Priority Areas of Research

TMO encourages health research in the Cook Islands that aligns with its health research priorities. These priorities include:

1. Improving health and wellbeing of Cook Islands peoples

Research focused on reducing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), multidisciplinary approaches, and prevention/intervention strategies.

All research that seeks to improve health and wellbeing and understand the biological, behavioural, social, cultural, environmental, and occupational processes underlying health and wellbeing of the Cook Islands population is within the scope of the health priorities.

2. Creating health knowledge

Research that informs practices, deepens intellectual expertise, and considers social, cultural, and real-life contexts.

The primary role of Cook Islands research is to generate knowledge. Hence, health research should aim to:

- Gain and enhance knowledge and understanding to inform practices to improve the health of the Cook Islands population
- Deepen and enrich the intellectual and practical research expertise of Cook Islands researchers to contribute to the development of a strong Cook Islands knowledge

base. Cook Islands health research should be derived from Cook Islands people's worldviews, social contexts, and real-life experiences.

- Health research should be transformative and translational. All research that demonstrates plans for effective dissemination and utilisation of results are within the scope of the health priorities. For example, research into social and economic factors that will lead to a better understanding of contributing factors that affect health.

3. Building capacity and capability

Participation of Cook Islands researchers, research governance, and accountability.

All research within the scope of the research priorities will build capacity and capability of Cook Islands researchers. Participation of Cook Islands peoples at all levels of research, including research governance and decision-making, applied and professional research, and implementation of the research project will ensure that the research is responsive and accountable to the research needs of the Cook Islands population.

Alignment to the Overall National Development Goals and TMO Strategic Plans

The priorities are aligned with:

- The vision and mission of TMO
- The Cook Islands National Sustainable Development Agenda
- Te Marae Ora Ara-Tango Anga'anga: Cook Islands National Health Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

Health Research Procedures

I. Health Research Committee (HRC)

- The TMO HRC oversees ethical and scientifically sound research.
- Functions include advising TMO on research priorities, assessing applications, and monitoring research conduct.

II. Research Process

Research Proposal Submission

Researchers must submit a detailed proposal including project title, aims, methodology, participants, and alignment with TMO priorities. Please refer to the attached Research Proposal Application Form (Annex 1)

Ethics Approval and Research Permit

- Researchers apply for ethics approval from the Cook Islands Research Ethics Committee (CIREC).
- Researchers apply for a Research Permit from the Cook Islands National Research Committee.

III. TMO Support Letter

Once research application has been assessed, TMO through the HRC will issue a Letter of Support to the Researcher expressing the full approval and support of the Committee.

IV. Process Flow

The detailed process can be found in Annex 2 for more guidance on the procedure of securing approval and support from TMO for health research to be conducted in the Cook Island before obtaining Ethics Approval and Research Permit to Cook Islands Ethics Committee and Cook Islands Research Committee, respectively.

Authorisation

This policy is authorised by the Secretary of Health (SOH) and TMO Executive per approved Resolution No. 2024-06-003 dated 28 June 2024 and will be effective from 1 July 2024.

Associated Documents

Health Assessment Guide for HRC
HRC Terms of Reference
Composition of the HRC

Other information

For queries, contact the Planning and Funding Directorate in Tupapa at 29664.

Research Proposal Application Form

Project Title	
Researcher/s	
Supervisor/Mentor	
Proposed project duration:	
Start date:	End date:
Funding for the Project	

Research Design

Research aims and objectives (Bullet point).
Design - Include research question/s, methodology, methods and data collection

Participants

Describe your participants.

Alignment to TMO Research priorities

Describe how your research is aligned to TMO research priorities
Please note the following should your proposal be accepted by the TMO Research Committee: 1. Apply for ethics approval from the Cook Islands Research Ethics Committee 2. Apply for a Research Permit from the Cook Islands National Research Committee

Research Proposal Application Process Flow

Activity	Responsible	Timeline	Notes
Submission of Research Proposal Application Form along with the supporting documents	Researcher		Submission can be either physical submission or through email
Confirm receipt of the application	TMO HRC	Within 2 working days from confirmed date of receipt	
Application Review and Evaluation of TMO Health Research Committee	TMO HRC		
Issuance of Support Letter	TMO HRC Chair		
Confirm receipt of TMO Support Letter	Researcher		