



POI FOR YOUR HEALTH

The first research study to measure the effects of International Poi on physical and cognitive function in healthy older adults is underway.

A pākehā from America studying poi? I am often met with confusion, curiosity, and sometimes skepticism when explaining my research on poi and health. It can all be dispelled quite simply, if you consider one small fact ... the whole world practices poi. It may take on many shapes and sizes, but people around the globe enjoy spinning a weight on the end of a cord in circular patterns around their bodies, and they all refer to the art by its Māori name, "poi." I have been practicing and teaching International Poi (an overarching term which refers to poi practiced outside of Māoridom) for over a decade. During this time, I have witnessed the positive impact of poi on many people's lives (including my own), be it physically, mentally, emotionally, and everything in between. But I have always wanted ... more. Why, exactly, does it feel so good to spin a weight on a cord in a circle? How, exactly, might it affect the brain and the body? And so, naturally, I moved to the other

side of the world to measure the effects of poi on physical and cognitive function in a clinical trial. I wanted to discover how science and culture might meet, and what they might say to each other about a weight orbiting on the end of a string.

Working between the Centre for Brain Research and Dance Studies, the first round of an assessor-blind randomised control trial has just concluded. Forty healthy adults over 60 years old participated in a month of International Poi lessons (treatment group) or Tai Chi lessons (control group), and underwent a series of pre- and post-tests measuring things like balance, upper limb range of motion, bimanual coordination, grip strength, and cognitive flexibility. Feedback from the participants after their International Poi lessons has been exciting: "Positive on flexibility, stress release, coordination and concentration. Totally, totally positive. Mental and physical." "I am able to use my left wrist more freely, and I am focusing better. Learning to age in a positive way. A great exercise and I hope to continue with this."

We are currently facing unprecedented population ageing worldwide, and simple, effective strategies to maintain cognitive and physical function in old age are urgently needed. There is evidence indicating that moderate exercise, in particular Tai Chi, has beneficial effects on balance, fear of falling, blood pressure, and cognitive performance in older adults. International Poi shares many characteristics with Tai Chi, and also has some unique features that may specifically benefit motor control and cognitive function. This pilot study is the first in the world to evaluate these potential benefits, with a view toward designing a larger randomised controlled trial for adults affected by stroke and mild cognitive impairment. This research may also have specific implications in Māoridom, as many physical and mental health programs have been aimed at Māori populations, but there are few approaches offered in a whānau context that utilise activities found within Māori culture.

Conducting the first research in a field can often leave one confused, curious, and sometimes skeptical, but I believe working at the intersection of science and culture to study a weight orbiting on the end of a cord is the perfect place for a pākehā from America to be. This study is an important stepping stone toward future International Poi research, and I hope it will have ever growing implications for improving health and prolonging quality of life worldwide.

If you'd like to learn more about my research, or are interested in participating in the next round of the study, visit www.spinpoi.com or email krie192@aucklanduni.ac.nz.

Kate Riegle Van-West

UNINEWS highlights some of the University research milestones that have hit the headlines in the past couple of months.

FISHING

A study that exposed six decades of widespread under reporting and dumping of marine fish has been covered extensively in the media. Lead researcher Dr Glenn Simmons from the New Zealand Asia Institute at the Business School appeared on *Nine To Noon*, *Paul Henry*, *Radio Live*, *NewsHub* and *One News*, and was quoted in print and online. The research, part of a decade-long, international project to assess the total global marine catch, put the true New Zealand catch at 2.7 times official figures.

GRADUATION

AGING GRACEFULLY

The story of 84-year-old Nancy Keat, oldest graduate in this Autumn's Graduation has had a dream run with a piece coming up on TV3 news, stories in the *NZ Herald online*, *the Auckland City Harbour News*, *the East & Bays Courier*, *the Northern Advocate* and the *Wairarapa Times*.

DANCERS

The Cesan brothers Richard, Andrew and Josh, graduated together, all with Bachelor of Dance Studies. The story and photographs featured in *Sunday Star-Times*, *Sunday News*, *Central Leader* and *East & Bays Courier*.

WATER

Professor Mohammed Mehdi Farid, from the Faculty of Engineering's Chemical & Materials department discusses his life in Iraq during the 1990 Gulf War and the lengths he had to go to in order to get clean drinking water for his family. His story was part of a feature in the *Dominion Post* on the possible effects of a major earthquake on Wellington's infrastructure: "Post-quake preparedness- the lowdown on emergency water".

CORNEAL RESEARCH

A video on Professor Trevor Sherwin's innovative corneal research (hosted now on the UOA YouTube page at <https://youtu.be/EDn-COxytjI>), has had more than 820 views on the Facebook page of Optometry Australia. A clip from the video also features on the webpage of Optometry UK.