



Jessica Parr

Heart disease epidemiology and obesity in Aotearoa New Zealand

Obesity came into the spotlight as a serious health concern through the rising medical anxiety surrounding cardiovascular heart disease after the Second World War. In line with other economically wealthy countries such as, the United States, United Kingdom and mainland Europe, mortality rates in Aotearoa New Zealand after the Second World War reflected the shift toward non-communicable diseases being the biggest killers. From 1950 to 1970, mortality rates due to heart disease steadily increased. In response to the changing health paradigm from infectious diseases to chronic conditions, health professionals needed new methods and tools to understand and treat these conditions. This paper explores the rise of heart disease-focused epidemiology in New Zealand and the wider Pacific and considers how the studies and reported findings shaped responses to obesity in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1960s and 1970s, researchers under the leadership of respected epidemiologist Ian Prior were innovative in their approaches, publishing findings that warned of stark health trends, especially in relation to Pacific peoples, that gained little policy traction at the time. Trends in longitudinal research during this postwar period related to heart disease, obesity, and diabetes not only reflected developments in medicine. But these studies also demonstrated a disconnection or significant lag between reported findings and meaningful health policy initiatives from the New Zealand Government in the latter part of the twentieth century.