

Moving with the times: evolution of Buttabeen Motivation – a community-based, Pacific-centred approach to health

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INTRODUCTION

Buttabeen Motivation (BBM) is a grassroots initiative aiming to improve Pasifika and Māori health through free community bootcamps offering exercise, motivation and nutritional advices, and with online programmes of workouts and meal plans. It is a dynamic organisation, responding to community needs, providing practical solutions to issues such as food insecurity and influenza vaccination while maintaining its core focus of reducing obesity among Pasifika and Māori through nutrition and physical activity.. BBM forms active and changing relationships with numerous organisations that offer support. They would like to work with the government and the district health boards, but the structure and changing nature of their organisation does not fit traditional funding models. To show that BBM is effective for Pacific people beyond anecdotal evidence, BBM has partnered with University of Auckland researchers. The research team are using a kaupapa Māori and co-design approach to explore how BBM might benefit the community and reduce health inequities, especially whether BBM's model of social collectivism enables sustainable weight loss for Pasifika and Māori in the current obesogenic environment. Weight reduction programmes typically find that after initial success, participants have reverted to pre-programme weight by five years. BBM's "whole of life change" approach may lead to sustained weight loss not demonstrated by other programmes. Using co-design, a BBM/University of Auckland partnership is evaluating the effectiveness of the BBM programme for sustained health and wellbeing. BBM is grounded in the Pacific/indigenous health frameworks fonofale, te whare tapa whā and fa'afaletui addressing physical, mental, spiritual, family and social health in the context of people's lives. The research will use a longitudinal cohort approach study design, using metrics and outcomes of relevance to its participants and the programme.

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A systems analysis will facilitate understanding of the strengths and challenges to delivering a holistic and sustained service for the community. BBM provides much promise in reducing health inequities for Pasifika and Māori, however the model creates challenges for ongoing funding, business structure and evaluation. The goal is to find ways that both the programme and social institutions, including funders and evaluators, can adapt to meet these real-world challenges.

Buttabeen Motivation (BBM) is a grassroots community-led organisation firmly grounded in its Auckland Pacific community roots, and adapting to changing social needs. It was started by Samoan/Māori Dave Letele as free community bootcamps offering exercise, motivation and nutritional advice, focused on enabling Pasifika and Māori people to enact ongoing healthy and active lifestyles for themselves, their children, their wider whānau. Despite a challenging childhood Letele established a successful rugby league career. However when this ended he gained weight, became depressed, lost his business, his family, his health, and hit rock-bottom.¹ He began boxing training, slowly lost

100 kg and got his life back on track. He created BBM to show others how it is possible, and give people tools for living longer, healthier lives.

BBM grew, running classes at different times of the day, catering for all ages, shapes, sizes and weight, and different levels of fitness. Activities are free, and people may attend regularly every week, or intermittently whenever they choose. People may 'fall off the wagon', but they can use the BBM toolkit to get back on. The environment is communal, supportive, and non-judgemental. The motto is 'no excuses'. Their volunteer trainers have been through their own health journey with BBM and complete a Skills Active Aotearoa programme.

Other initiatives have developed. A lifestyle plan for \$1 a day provides workout plans, nutritional plans including shopping list and menu guides, and ongoing support. A specialised programme for the morbidly obese, From the Couch, was established. BBM Rangatahi Māia (Youth) Programme covers physical activity and nutrition elements as well as work readiness skills. BBM maintains a strong social media presence. The open BBM Facebook account (<https://www.facebook.com/brownbuttbean/>) now has 60,000 followers and the private BBM Facebook group has 15,000 members, with online video workouts, information and updates. The organisation uses Facebook to promote its various programmes and rapidly communicate new initiatives, giving an agility to respond to changing community needs. Members can be polled to gauge support for a proposed new programme – for example a late afternoon class for parents with children in South Auckland.

BBM changes and evolves over time in response to both internal and external factors. In the first COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020), the pandemic outbreak exposed health and social inequity issues for Pasifika and Māori communities,² who have a higher prevalence of underlying health issues such as diabetic, respiratory, cardiovascular and renal comorbidities associated with increased severity of, and mortality from, COVID-19 illness.³ High-density households, sub-standard housing and poverty increased the possibility of infectious disease spread, previously demonstrated for influenza.⁴ Pasifika and Māori populations were likely to be more severely impacted by income loss and unemployment from COVID-19 restrictions, also more likely to be working in frontline employment. Food insecurity rapidly rose with the onset of lockdowns and the associated loss of income.

During lockdown, BBM live-streamed online exercise sessions on Facebook weekly,

supporting people in self-isolation to maintain social connections. Letele hosted live talk events with guests helping educate the online community on health-related issues such as maintaining mental health, understanding diabetes, healthy homes and COVID-19 testing, as well as endorsing social distancing, hand-washing and mask-wearing. BBM served as a platform for dispelling anti-vaccination misinformation in Pasifika-friendly languages. BBM were involved in two influenza vaccine events. They provided a free drive-in influenza vaccination programme in South Auckland promoted on national television and through a video posted on their website. To address food insecurity, supported by philanthropic funders, food providers and a GiveALittle appeal, BBM supplied donated food and necessities for families in need. At their Drive-in Foodbank, volunteers filled boots with vegetable and other healthy food stuffs at a rate of three cars per minute.

Post-lockdown, BBM continued to provide food parcels on application to families in financial need. They launched BBM Kai, a free six-week programme teaching people how to cook healthy meals on a budget for themselves and their families. By July 2021 this had transitioned into a large community kitchen at new headquarters, providing daily healthy meals for \$2 koha (contribution).

In the August / September 2021 lockdown, BBM received food donations and distributed parcels for community groups, social workers, schools, police groups, churches, plus their usual drive-through at an unprecedented volume. Vaccination against COVID-19 is encouraged. Virtual fitness sessions are streamed live on Facebook and health goal challenges continue online. Posts offer tips on nutrition, exercise and keeping a positive mind set. People share experiences and offer support and encouragement.

The organisation believes they are having a positive impact, not only on the obesity epidemic, but also assisting with people's mental and social health and overall wellbeing. BBM is grounded in the Pacific/indigenous health frameworks fonofale,⁵ te whare tapa whā⁶ and fa'afaletui,^{7,8} approaches shown to be beneficial for Pasifika and Māori, addressing physical, mental, spiritual, family and social health in the context of people's lives.

Activities are financed through donations of time and resources, and fund-raisers such as auctions and Fit to Fight Boxing charity events with BBM members. BBM forms active and changing relationships with numerous organisations that

offer support. They would like to work with the government and the district health boards, but the structure and changing nature of their organisation does not fit traditional funding models.

To show that BBM is effective for Pacific people beyond anecdotal evidence, BBM has partnered with University of Auckland researchers. The research team are using a co-design approach⁹ to explore how BBM might benefit the community and reduce health inequities, especially whether BBM's model of social collectivism enables sustainable weight loss for Pasifika and Māori in the current obesogenic environment.^{10 11}

Numerous studies of weight reduction programmes for adults involving dietary changes and/or increased exercise generally show initial weight reduction, but the effects are seldom sustained, and by five years weight loss is modest, or participants have reverted to their pre-programme weight.^{12 13} Most studies assessing interventions for prevention and management of obesity amongst Pasifika and Māori are of low quality and have shown modest short-term weight loss at best.¹⁴⁻²⁸ Because BBM is an existing intervention freely open to everyone who wishes to participate, a randomised trial methodology is not possible. Unlike other programmes, which are designed for the purposes of research, and usually cease at the end of the study, BBM is a long-standing intervention which will continue independent of the research. We will use a longitudinal (pre-post study) cohort approach study design, using metrics and outcomes of relevance to its participants and the programme. A systems analysis will facilitate understanding of the strengths and challenges to delivering a holistic and sustained service for the community.

BBM is a dynamic entity, with shifting directions and alliances, while maintaining its core focus of reducing obesity among Pasifika and Māori through nutrition and physical activity. BBM provides much promise in reducing health inequities for Pasifika and Māori, however the model creates challenges for ongoing funding, business structure and evaluation. The goal is to find ways that both the programme and social institutions, including funders and evaluators, can adapt to meet these real-world challenges.

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