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Kava is a central ingredient in Pasifika culture, and its effects on drivers and road safety are being studied by former policeman and soldier Dr Apo Aporosa who has received a Pasifika post-doctoral fellowship worth $230,000 from the Health Research Council of New Zealand.

Dr Aporosa is a research fellow based in the University of Waikato’s Anthropology Programme working with Psychology’s Traffic and Road Safety research group. He has a doctorate in Development Studies from Massey University that focusses on the interplay between traditional kava use and contemporary society.

Kava is a traditional Pacific Island drink with great cultural significance that produces soporific relaxant effects similar to sedative drugs. In his study, which is the first of its kind, Dr Aporosa will work with three groups of 20 participants: one group will be non-kava users (control), the second will be a kava-fasting group (kava-users who have abstained from kava for a 90-hour elimination period) and the third group will be a regular kava-using group (users who drink frequently throughout the week).

Participants will undergo cognitive testing at hourly intervals over a six-hour period, the average kava session duration.

To comply with average traditional kava consumption rates, each participant within the two active groups will drink six cups of kava an hour.

Participants will be tested using a computer-mounted psychometric measure that assesses vigilance, divided attention and reaction.

“This study resulted out of my own history of kava use as a Fijian, my experience of drug-drivers and motor vehicle accidents as a policeman, and more recently consultation by the New Zealand Police Prosecution Service as part of their prosecution of kava drivers,” says Dr Aporosa.

“Until a quantitative assessment of kava drivers has been completed, no authoritative comments can be made on kava’s effect on driving.”

Dr Aporosa says in the Pasifika culture, kava is recognised as having a ‘mana’ aspect to it, therefore kava and its use is uniquely linked to traditional practices and respect behaviours.

“Fijians also refer to kava as ‘wainivanua’, literally meaning an ‘ingestible manifestation of our culture, the land and our people’.”

Dr Aporosa estimates there are more than 20,000 kava users on an average Friday or Saturday night in New Zealand with its popularity growing among non-Pasifikans. Most of these users are consuming kava at volumes 32 times greater than pharmacologically recommended, with many then driving home.

“Injury resulting from road traffic accidents is the leading cause of hospitalisation for Pasifika men and women living in New Zealand, with anecdotal reports suggesting kava contributes to this,” says Dr Aporosa.

While kava contains a number of active compounds called kavalactones making it mildly psychoactive, it is neither alcoholic nor hallucinogenic and its gentle effects are different to those of alcohol or most other drugs. Users describe kava as subtle, producing a sense of relaxation and sociability without impairing judgement or causing inhibition as experienced with alcohol.

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