Take the Time to Listen

A new generation of Hawaiian leaders are rising to the challenges facing our islands and our planet. E Ho‘okanaka features these important new voices.

Marcus Iwane, MD, Chief, Kaiser Permanente Nānākuli Clinic. - Photos: Courtesy Kaiser Permanente

By Puanani Fernandez-Akamika

Born and raised in Millilani, O‘ahu, Marcus Kawika Iwane, 36, graduated from Kamehameha Schools Kapālama and earned his medical degree from UH’s John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM), where he was a Nadine Kohanimoku Scholar and American Medical Association Minority Scholar. He completed his residency training locally, eventually serving as a chief medical resident at Kaimuki Medical Center. Upon completing his residency, Iwane, an internist and primary care physician, joined the Hawai‘i’s Permanente Medical Group and he currently serves as chief of Kaiser Permanente’s Nānākuli Clinic in Nānākuli. Iwane is vice president of ‘Ahuwai o mā Ka‘aua (the Association for Native Hawaiian Physicians) and in this capacity has partnered with community organizations and Indigenous physicians across the Pacific Basin to help host the biennial Pacific Region Indigenous Doctors Congress (PRIDCo) which allows him to mentor medical students, residents and aspiring physicians in Hawai‘i and beyond.

What inspired you to become a doctor?

“As a child, I spent many weekends with my kupuna in Nānākuli. I remember him working in his māla. He encouraged me to get my hands dirty and feel the ‘āina. I remember hearing him speak to his kalo. I can still taste the poi he made for us. It wasn’t until I began to explore the idea of practicing medicine, that I realized that my grandfather had provided me with a solid foundation by demonstrating the importance of aloha ‘āina, ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i and cultural health. I bring these values to my medical practice.

“I enjoy getting to know my patients, and seeing their progress over time. The causes of health issues and some of the solutions are greatly influenced by unique social and cultural factors that aren’t always addressed in medical school. I’m invigorated by the challenge of combining traditional Western knowledge with the wisdom of our ancestors.”

Who were your mentors?

“Dr. Emmett Auali, the late Dr. Kealani Blaisdel and Dr. DeeAnn Carpenter are three that quickly come to mind. My mentors taught me the importance of building relationships that lead to trust. Relationships are key to effective health care. If a doctor has a bad relationship with his or her patient, that patient will only come in if they’re very sick and the physician could miss a chance to catch something early. Good, trusting relationships between doctors and patients can be extremely therapeutic, and a healing form of treatment. Creating powerful, healthy relationships is what I love most about medicine. Another important tool in our care is what’s called ‘talking like a doctor.’ I think it’s important to take the time to pause and listen. I find that a lot of times our patients will tell us what’s wrong with them if we just listen and ask enough.”

How has becoming a doctor changed you?

“It has helped me to realize my kuleana to provide care to Native Hawaiians as well as to the broader community. This is what energizes me. I’m grateful to connect with so many people in our community and to help them. This positive energy also helps me to be a better husband and father. When I started my career, I quickly realized the challenges of applying book knowledge to clinical practice, the ‘art’ of medicine. Primary care physicians must be well-versed, nimble, and adaptable. We must also appreciate that our patients can teach us so much, we just have to listen.”
What is your vision for the health of our lāhui?

“....”

Any advice for young people aspiring to careers in health services?

“...”

Do you have mana’o for our lāhui during this pandemic?

“Social distancing is difficult for us in Hawai‘i, but it’s had a significant protective impact on the spread of COVID-19 here in the islands. ‘Olelo no‘eau, ‘Lilau aku ‘oe i ka ‘ulu i ka wēkū, i ke alo no ka ‘ulu a hāla,” speaks of how we can strive to reach the breadfruit at the top of the tree and miss the breadfruit in front of us. We’re all waiting for the day when we can spend time together again, go places without worrying and carry on with our usual routines. But we cannot miss the opportunities that are right in front of us. While we’re at home together we have the chance to focus on strengthening our ‘ohana. We also have extra time to invest in ourselves and learn new skills. In the community, we’re supporting one another and uniting in ways that I never could’ve imagined. We must continue to build upon this even after we’ve conquered COVID-19.”