

# HAWAI'I JOURNAL WATCH

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**Highlights of recent research from the University of Hawai'i (UH) and the Hawai'i State Department of Health (HDOH)**

## NATIVE HAWAIIAN MEN BENEFIT FROM CULTURALLY-APPROPRIATE CANCER EDUCATION

Culturally-grounded colon cancer educational sessions are beneficial to Native Hawaiian *kāne* (men). Researchers led by Kevin D. Cassel DrPH, of the University of Hawai'i Cancer Center, recruited *kāne* and offered educational sessions based on the traditional Native Hawaiian practice of *hale mua* (men's house). Results showed that 232 *kāne* attended a session, including 149 who were over age 50. Of these 149, 31% had never discussed colon health or cancer screening with a doctor. After the sessions, 92% reported they learned something new about colon health, and 91% reported they liked discussing colon health with other *kāne*. Moreover, 76% agreed to undergo colon cancer screening via fecal immunochemical testing. The paper (PubMed ID: [32008466](#)) is published in *Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Disparity Issues*.

## EVERGREEN SHRUB COMPOUND SHOWS PROMISE AS DIFFERENTIATING AGENT

The small evergreen shrub *Rhazya stricta* is commonly used in herbal drugs in South Asia and the Middle East. Researchers including Leng Chee Chang PhD, of the Daniel K. Inouye College of Pharmacy, extracted, purified, and isolated 7 compounds from the plant. They then screened the compounds and tested their effects on mouse embryonic stem cells (mESCs). One compound, called RS7, inhibited mESC proliferation and induced differentiation. Further analysis showed the compound was ursolic acid. The findings suggest ursolic acid may be effective as a differentiating agent in treatment of cancer, the researchers concluded. The paper (PubMed ID: [31680088](#)) was published in the *Pakistan Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences*.

## STATE POLICIES TOWARDS ADDRESSING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC SHOW PARTISAN DIFFERENCES

Democrat- and Republican-led states differ in their policy responses to the opioid crisis, including the leveraging of Medicaid expansion. Researchers including Clifford Bersamira PhD, of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work, conducted surveys and examined legislation across the United States, and completed in-depth case studies in 5 states to understand how states are addressing the epidemic. Between 2014 and 2018, there were 1804 pieces of opioid-related legislation introduced in the United States, and 497 were enacted. Results showed differences in states' reactions to the Medicaid expansion: Republican-led states were more likely to pursue targeted reforms, such as improving addiction treatment coverage for traditional Medicaid populations, while Democrat-led states committed more resources to addressing the epidemic, including through Medicaid expansion. In some states with mixed-party leadership, the urgent need to address the epidemic was given as

the reason why policymakers adopted Medicaid expansion. The paper (PubMed ID: [31808787](#)) is published in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*.

## PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES AND POLICY MAKERS IN HAWAI'I

The attitudes of Hawai'i policy makers towards public health issues may improve or decline over time, but these ups and downs are not tied to the severity of public health problems. Researchers including Meghan McGurk MPH, of the UH Office of Public Health Studies, surveyed elected and appointed officials in Hawai'i about 23 issues in 2007 and 2013. Results showed 5 public health issues decreased in their importance to policy makers, including drug abuse, access to health care, and pedestrian safety. Only obesity and access to healthy groceries increased in importance. There was little concordance between public health data and the policy makers' ratings of the importance of issues. The paper (PubMed ID: [26075196](#)) is published in *Frontiers in Public Health*.

## THE IMPACT OF TOBACCO 21

Hawai'i's Tobacco 21 law, which raised the legal age of sales to 21, may have helped reduce the sales in the state of cigarette and cigar products. Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gathered Universal Product Code level data on cigarette and cigar sales in large food stores from 2012 to 2017. Results showed average monthly cigarette unit sales dropped 4.4%, and the market share belonging to menthol cigarettes, which are favored by adolescents and young adults, also declined. In addition, average monthly sales of cigars decreased by 12.1% after the law took effect. Lila Johnson MPH, of the Hawai'i State Department of Health, contributed to the discussion regarding the intense preparation activity by the Tobacco Prevention and Education Program staff and the statewide coalition prior to the first year of the law's implementation. The paper (PubMed ID: [31932332](#)) is published in *Tobacco Control*.

## RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN SCHOOL CHILDREN

Chronic absenteeism from school has been linked to poor health and low socioeconomic status, and racial/ethnic differences in rates have also been found. However, studies of chronic absenteeism that disaggregate subgroups of Asian children have been lacking. Researchers led by Eunjung Lim PhD, of the John A. Burns School of Medicine, used a nationally representative dataset, the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, to study chronic absenteeism. Results showed chronic absenteeism rates were higher in children older than 14, those from lower-income families, and those with asthma or behavioral problems. The chronic absenteeism rate for Filipino children, and the rate for American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander children were not significantly different than the rate for white children. Children in the Other Asian group had a significantly lower chronic absenteeism rate than white children. The researchers concluded that further studies should investigate how cultural differences and other factors affect missing school. The study (PubMed ID: [30843228](#)) is published in the *Journal of School Health*.