# New Zealand: The Land of the Long White Cloud

November 28, 2016 By Greg Jefferys

Last week I flew to New Zealand to meet with a group of friends there who included Hep C activists, medical practitioners and also people who have been cured of their Hep C through generic treatment. I had been to New Zealand once before, more than forty years ago, and returning to New Zealand in such circumstances was an amazing journey for me because I was returning to the place where, 42 years earlier, I had gone 'cold turkey' to kick my heroin addiction, to kick the habit, which I did not know then, had given me Hepatitis C.

I guess I should share a little of that story.

I grew up around Sydney's northern beaches and left home when I was 16 because of ongoing conflicts with my father.

That was in 1969.

I hit the road and lived where ever I could. Home was where ever I could find a place to sleep out of the rain. Sometimes it was in a dumped car in the bush or on a friend's sofa or under a sheet of tin.

For short periods I rented rooms in shared houses but I was a restless soul and never stayed long in one place.

Eventually I drifted deeper and deeper into the drug culture of 1970's Sydney and ended up becoming addicted to heroin at the age of 19.

Heroin was very available in those days with many tourists simply smuggling a few ounces from Thailand in their underwear or hidden in their luggage when they returned from a few weeks in Asia.

There were no sniffer dogs back then and Customs had not yet realised what was happening in the drug world in Australia.

Like most addicts I began a little low level drug dealing to support my habit and one day in the middle of a deal the police pounced on me. I had a pistol shoved in my face and was told my head would be blown off if I moved.

It turned out that the guy I was doing the deal with was a police informant and I had been set up. Of course I was a small fish and the few capsules of heroin I had on me earned me a fine and suspended sentence however the shock of having the pistol stuck in my face made me realise that the world I was living in was a world that would sooner or later kill me.

So I decided it was time to make a new start.

I had seen friends try to kick their habits and knew how hard it was so I was savvy enough to know that the only way I could have any hope of a new start was to get away from everyone I knew in the drug scene…. So I flew to New Zealand and went cold turkey in my tent camped in a forest near the Bay of Island on the very northern tip of New Zealand.

To cut a long story short I lived in New Zealand for a bit more than one year and stayed clean. I got involved in Tibetan Buddhism and also the martial art of Tai Kwon Do. I was fortunate to meet a Tibetan monk of great wisdom and a Korean Tai Kwon Do master who was equally wise in a different way and, under their guidance, I did a lot of meditation and got very, very fit, mentally and physically.

So after a year I returned to Australia and (not without a struggle) remained clean.
As a result I always considered New Zealand to be my spiritual homeland, the place where I was “born again” and the place where I managed to turn my life around, to step back from the brink of the abyss. But from then until now I had never returned to New Zealand. A couple of times I almost did but it never happened.
So forty two years later I was back in the place of my rebirth. Not as a young man of 21 just learning about life but as an old man of 63 who had lived and learned.

What a different visit this was. The first time I knew no-one and had to go through a long time of being alone; alone and wrestling with my demons.
This time I was meeting dear friends and angels.

It is one of the wonders of being human in the 21st century that we can build relationships with people thousands of miles away so it was wonderful to finally meeting face to face with people who I have been corresponding with for more than a year. Pivotal to this meeting was my very good friend and Hep C activist Hazel Heal. Hazel lives in Dunedin and kindly organised a wonderful get together at her place.

The really amazing thing about this get together was that (I believe) every single person attending it had once had Hep C, but was now cured. That was certainly a first for me because in Australia there is not really any such close knit Hep C community (that I am aware of).
Hazel and I shared the common experience of being the first people in our respective countries to “come out” publicly about having Hep C and treating the disease with generics. Hazel had seen a news story about what I was doing in Australia and was that that moment about to sell her house to fund the treatment of her Hepatitis C with Harvoni. When she read about the generic option she treated with generics and now both has her home and her health. She is cured.
Hazel was also brave enough to go public with her story and this started the chain reaction in New Zealand that my media work had done in Australia.
Many people with Hep C in New Zealand began generic treatment. As in Australia there was great resistance to generics by the mainstream medical ‘Establishment’ and it was hard for New Zealanders to find a doctor who would write a prescription. But then as more and more results came through more doctors began to write prescriptions.
The flow of generics into NZ also put pressure on Big Pharma to reduce prices and the New Zealand government was able to negotiate a deal with Abbvie to make the VPak available through their health system at a very good price.
Of course the VPak is quite a good option for people with Genotype 1 but not so good for other genotypes so in New Zealand now many doctors actually tell their patients to go the generic route. This has all happened in less than 12 months and again shows how if a few brave people will make a stand and get some media attention is it possible to make positive changes happen very quickly.

Anyway back to my friends and the party.
We had the party at Hazel’s home (the one she would have had to have sold if not for generics) and I was honoured to be given a traditional Maori welcome and the most wonderful gift of a Maori ponamau, which is a pendant hand carved from New Zealand jade intended to be worn as a protection from negative forces. What was really special about this gift was that it was carved especially for me and included features that represented myself, my wife and my three sons. I was deeply moved and honoured to receive this gift (pictured above) and also the wonderful friendship of all the people I met in Dunedin.

---

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.