Are health issues prominent in the NZ election campaign? If so, what health issues are being talked about? If not, why not?
Health has been relatively prominent in the election so far. However, the health conversation has been dominated by the worsening stresses on the health system, which have not been solved by an centralising reform of the system in mid-2022. These stresses, from workforce, pay, difficulty in access and equity gaps, have been used by the right-wing opposition as a bat with which to beat the current (Labour) government. Within the health sector, there is significant discontent and there has been repeated strike action by nurses, senior doctors and laboratory staff over the last year. As usual with election campaigns, political parties rarely look on "health" in any way other than the most reductive sense, and I have yet to hear health spokespeople being quizzed on their respective party's social or climate policies which would have a much larger impact on population health than promises of improved funding in secondary care. This is surprising given the well-studied effects of the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s in NZ which gutted welfare support and hugely worsened health inequities.

Are climate and health concerns prominent?
Health concerns, specifically access to the health system are prominent and mentioned often, but rarely if ever have these been linked with climate. Climate itself has been prominent by its absence throughout the campaign. Two examples stand out for me for the utter failure by the major parties and the media- firstly in the debate between the two major parties (Labour and National), the leaders- both middle-aged white men called Chris- offered up the pathetic example of doing the recycling as their personal contribution to climate mitigation. Secondly, an extended interview on Radio New Zealand with Christopher Luxon of the National Party, and favourite for the position of prime minister post-election, had not a single question on climate change during its 21-minute duration. These stand out as examples of the lack of climate ambition across the major political parties in Aotearoa, and the failure of the media to have it as a core topic.

What are the key health issues at stake for Māori people and health organisations?
This is the 7th consecutive election for which I have been in New Zealand, and it is the one that has had by far the most overt and shameless racism on display. Putting the fringe parties aside (who between then will obtain less than 5% of the vote) 3 of the major parties, who on present polling are most likely to form the next government- National, ACT and NZ First- have repeatedly used perceptions of Māori advantage to appeal to a sadly sizeable sector of the Pākehā population who are seemingly ignorant of their own privileges. These have ranged from the false ("Māori are not indigenous" according to the leader of NZ First), to the worrisome (ACT suggesting a referendum on Te Tiriti o Waitangi would be a bottom line for them in any coalition negotiations), to the dangerous (candidates from the Māori Party, Te Pāti Māori, being forced to trespass unwanted visitors). Another threat unfortunately is that of a National-led government to close Te Aka Whai Ora, the barely-one-year-old Māori Health Authority. This was created during the afore-mentioned health reforms, and is one of the examples of an attempt to give proper agency to Māori as required by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Shutting it and subsuming it into the wider Health New Zealand structure would be a hugely retrograde step for a country in which the gaps between Māori and Pākehā health outcomes remain stubbornly and depressingly large.

Are disease prevention and health promotion being talked about? If so, in what way?
There has been little direct talk about health promotion. It creeps in with single issues, such as questions about GST on food and healthy diets, or access to vaping products, but health promotion as a distinct topic has had little or no overall discussion.
What has struck you about the NZ election campaign and health?
This has been a highly defensive and uninspiring election campaign from both the major parties. We have seen an unpopular Labour party, reelected with an unprecedented overall majority with a charismatic leader in 2020, failing to gain much traction, and a right-wing National Party failing to capitalise and remaining at a risk, albeit small, of losing an "unlosable" election. The utter lack of discussion and ambition on climate policy has been embarrassing, with the important exceptions of the Green Party (currently polling in the low teens) and Te Pāti Māori (in the low single digits). Instead of New Zealand moving to the front on climate mitigation, particularly in areas like agriculture where our emissions are enormous, means we will continue to be seen to be dragged along as a climate laggard by international leaders. For a country highly dependent on high-emission dairy and meat exports and long-haul international tourism, this puts us in an extremely vulnerable position.

What are the implications of the election outcome for Australia, especially on health matters?
Opposition parties are in a relatively strong position globally at present due to cost-of-living increases, inflation, health sector stresses and so on. It is relatively simple (and simplistic) for them to use these as means with which to criticise incumbent governments. However, there is no doubt that the current Labour government in New Zealand has helped in this regard. The feeling of a transformative government coming into power in 2017 has evaporated - who now remembers Ardern’s "climate change is my generation’s nuclear-free moment" comment except as an ironic example of what-might-have-been? Labour has seemed incapable of using their historic majority since 2020 to drive necessary and likely popular change. A capital gains tax seems as far off as ever for example, and the present PM ruled out a Green Party-inspired wealth tax despite its popularity with voters. Engaging in a wholesale health sector reform in the middle of a pandemic and with an increasingly stretched and stressed health workforce was a misstep for the ages. Labour remains the second biggest party in the country, but they may well look with some trepidation at the rise of the Green Party and consider their own sense of themselves as the natural leader on the left. For Australia, health will be a major topic in the next election given many of the same stresses in the health sector exist on the west side of the Tasman. I would hope that the Australian media can hold politicians to account by focusing on health in the broadest sense and the effect of their social and climate policies on population health. Political ambition and a vision of a better, healthier and climate-secure future have been in short supply in NZ in recent years and unfortunately we seem stuck between the rock of a right-wing, anti-Māori, anti-environment National-led government and the hard place of an timid and insipid Labour-led one.