I used to live in South America. My parents made a spontaneous decision to move there for a year when I was 12 years old, so our family of seven packed up and embarked on an adventure. We were based in Chile, where Spanish is the dominant language, and prior to arriving my Spanish skills were basic. Actually, that’s generous. I knew how to say my name and how old I was but that’s pretty much it. We went full-time into a Chilean school where English was sparse, so full immersion meant by about 7 months I was near fluent in Spanish. Getting there was tough, but at least my whole whānau were in it learning together.

I’m Pākehā and grew up in a predominantly Pākehā community in Nelson where speaking a foreign language was something of a rarity. My own Pākehā tongue was on a journey itself in Chile, learning to make sounds and form words I was never previously comfortable with. Initially it was awkward but over time became second nature.
Hazel. Any issues processing that one? Don’t expect so in English-speaking New Zealand. However, in a Spanish-speaking world the phonetics of my name proved challenging. The English pronunciation of ‘H’ and ‘Z’ are foreign to the Spanish tongue, and thus ‘Hazel’ was frequently and absolutely...butchered. Having never, ever, had this be a problem before, initially I found it entertaining, but then tiring. With the upmost abstraction, Hazel morphed into Jeysen, Jeyser, Axel (how?!), and one neighbour resorted to calling me Gloria because Hazel was just too hard altogether. Who’s Gloria?

Just as Hazel is foreign to the Spanish tongue, so we find Te Reo Māori foreign to the Pākehā tongue. Hundreds of people in New Zealand are on the receiving end of having their names butchered, a pattern which extends into the health system.

I work in Rotorua Hospital and every single day I think about pronunciation as the incidence of Māori names is high within our populous inpatient Māori community.

My current Surgical Registrar (non-Māori) announces Māori names and places absolutely beautifully. I hit him up about it one day, noting that his pronunciation was lovely. He responded that he takes pride in pristine Māori pronunciation and practices the kupu until he nails it. Ka rawe.

As it happens, Spanish vowel sounds are the same as those in Te Reo Māori, and similar to many other Polynesian languages (Tongan, Samoan etc). When I started learning Te Reo about three years ago, the old tricks of my Spanish-speaking tongue cross-credited to help me in pronouncing Māori words.
It is challenging and may take a while to become comfortable in training our tongues to a new way of speaking, just like in me learning Spanish. Furthermore, it takes courage to pronounce well in a culture where mispronunciation is rife.

However, it does become normal and natural, and we don’t need full immersion or formal training to get there. I fervently believe that everyone can, and should, at least try—especially doctors where we are leaders in shaping workplace culture.

Correct pronunciation of names is the most basic form of showing respect to our patients. Furthermore, it’s a powerful tool in empowering our patients, building rapport, trust, and bridging some gaps where there are cultural divides.

Our job is to care and help people in and through their illness. Making an effort with kupu Māori is facilitating that.

One could argue that mispronunciation is part of Pākehā culture. Not something to be proud of, yet something that is slowly but surely changing—and each of us can be part of that wave.

What’s your name like? Has it ever been butchered? Repeatedly? I know what it’s like from living in Chile, but this is a reality for so many people here in their own country, city, and local hospital.

They say that privilege is when you don’t think something is a problem because it isn’t a problem for you personally. Maybe people get your name perfect every time.

If it’s difficult to digest that this an important issue for people with non-English names then maybe you could ask them and hear their stories.

I am heartened by the likes of my Registrar and other colleagues who make an effort with Te Reo. Many medical students and fellow House Officers pronounce well, and a number are taking this a step further having enrolled in Te Reo Māori classes. Ka mau te wehi!

Being on the frontlines means using Māori words daily for most doctors working anywhere in this country—be it names or places. I say that clinical excellence includes striving for correct pronunciation, a basic marker of respect to our patients and the most basic form of cultural competence.

As doctors we have a huge capacity for learning. We train our brains to reason correctly and hands to suture correctly—we are more than capable to learn to speak correctly too.

Let’s not create Jeysons, Axels, or even Glorias. Let’s be examples of excellence in this domain and, like my Registrar, pride ourselves in doing it right. Kia ora.