

He Kete Kōrero



WELLINGTON

University of Otago, Wellington Newsletter | Summer 2020

Dean's welcome

Tēnā koutou katoa

Welcome to the Summer 2020 issue of *He Kete Kōrero*.

As this intense year draws to a close, I would like to express my thanks to all our staff and students for their exceptional efforts over the past 12 months.

My most sincere thanks to all the academic staff who ensured students would not be disadvantaged by virtual teaching and exams, to the professional staff who kept the wheels turning, to the library staff who provided virtual advice and expertise during lockdown, to our IT staff who supported the move to working from home, to the researchers who consistently worked to produce world class research and who, despite everything, exceeded all previous records for external research income – and of course to all our students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who persevered through it all.

It was with a great sense of pride that I hosted this year's campus awards ceremony

Hui Whakanui Tauira in which we honour our best and brightest students. It was truly inspiring to see that the future of the health sector lies in such excellent hands.

In a year of upheavals I feel for those students who have been unable to attend graduation ceremonies in Dunedin as planned, and I hope you have found other ways to celebrate your achievements.

At this time, I would also like to acknowledge the substantial contribution made by a great many staff to the health and well-being of Aotearoa during the year. This includes not only the people who advised government and provided calm, careful science communication to the general public, but also the people who put in an extraordinary amount of work in the development of new clinical guidelines to cope with the ever-changing healthcare environment, provided leadership in hospitals and primary care, and who continued to deliver clinical services throughout lockdown.

In November I welcomed more than 150 alumni and friends to campus to hear **Professor Michael Baker** speak about New Zealand's COVID-19 response. I greatly appreciate the work of the Development and Alumni Relations Office in organising this Wellington Alumni Event and hope it will be the first of many such opportunities for us to meet and reconnect with old friends.

May you all have a safe and restful festive season.



Meri Kirihimete

PROFESSOR WILLIAM LEVACK
Dean and Head of Campus

Helping hands

New Zealand jewellers have put their hands together to create medals for public health researchers as a thanks for their work on the country's COVID-19 response.

Three Wellington jewellers, Becky Bliss, Caroline Thomas and Kelly McDonald, presented the one-of-a-kind medals to **Professor Nick Wilson**, **Professor Michael Baker** and **Dr Amanda Kvalsvig** at a special morning tea in November.

The jewellers are part of the *Hand Medal* project, a worldwide group of 3,000 artisans who have together crafted more than 70,000 small metal silhouettes of hands to gift to those working on the front lines and behind the scenes to combat the pandemic.

The medals symbolise the hand washing needed to combat the virus, as well as of the power of our hands to heal and connect.

That connection is a personal one in Wellington, with Ms Bliss, both a jeweller and a graphic designer who worked for many years in the health sector, reaching out to her friend and former Ministry of Health colleague **Louise Delany**, now a Senior Lecturer at the University of Otago, Wellington, to arrange for the medals to be gifted to Public Health staff.

Ms Delany says the medals celebrate the work of many in the Department of Public Health.



Left to right: Louise Delany with jewellers Becky Bliss, Caroline Thomas, Kelly McDonald and Professors Nick Wilson and Michael Baker, Dr Amanda Kvalsvig and Associate Professor George Thomson.

Marsden grants for research



Dr Kirsty Danielson

Three researchers at the University of Otago, Wellington, have received grants from the Marsden Fund to conduct research into topics ranging from tissue grafting to youth substance use to energy use in a warming world.

Dr Kirsty Danielson from the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia and **Dr Jude Ball** and **Dr Kimberley O'Sullivan** from the Department of Public Health have each been awarded Fast Start grants of \$300,000 over three years.



Dr Jude Ball

Dr Danielson will research tissue grafting to gain more understanding of how information is shared between donor tissue and recipient tissue via extracellular vesicles (EVs).

"EVs can have positive effects on neighbouring cells but we currently know very little about how this works in fat grafts for breast reconstruction post cancer treatment," she explains.



Dr Kimberley O'Sullivan

Dr Ball will investigate the reasons behind the dramatic decline in adolescent smoking, drinking and drug use in Aotearoa and other OECD countries over the past two decades. She hopes her findings will help local efforts to reduce substance-related harm.

Dr O'Sullivan will examine New Zealanders' summertime home energy use as the country adapts to a warming climate. The research will aid in developing recommendations for householders and policy makers on sustainable practices for summer heat management.

Liley Medal

Professor Mark Weatherall from the Department of Medicine has been jointly awarded the prestigious Health Research Council's Liley Medal, awarded annually for outstanding contributions to the health and medical sciences.

Professor Weatherall and fellow researcher Mark Holliday from the Medical Research Institute of New Zealand were presented with their medals at a ceremony at Government House in Wellington last month.



They were honoured for their work on the Novel START New Zealand-led study which found patients with mild asthma were much less likely to have a severe asthma attack if they used an inhaler containing a combination of preventive and reliever medication as needed.

The findings have led to the most significant change in asthma management in adults and adolescents in the last three decades.

The researchers plan to build on their work by looking at the use of a combination preventive and reliever inhaler for children, as well as across all severities of asthma.

Professor Weatherall says it is very satisfying to have both the research and his personal role in it recognised.

"The award is also a tribute to the large team of co-investigators and research participants involved."

Rheumatic fever focus



Dr Julie Bennett

Researchers at the University of Otago, Wellington, are among those to benefit from a major new funding round from the charity Cure Kids aimed at helping to eradicate rheumatic heart disease (RHD), New Zealand's 'disease of poverty'.

Dr Julie Bennett, a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Public Health, and **Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu**, Associate Dean (Pacific), who is based in the Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine and the Dean's Department, will each receive grants of almost \$600,000 over three years for research into new treatments to prevent RHD.



Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu

Dr Bennett is collaborating with researchers in Australia to trial a high-dose longer lasting penicillin infusion which could replace the painful monthly injections of penicillin – currently the only method of preventing rheumatic heart disease.

Dr Sika-Paotonu will explore different chemical forms of penicillin in order to develop a more acceptable and less painful form of the antibiotic which is better suited for RHD prevention.

Earlier research by **Professor Michael Baker** from the Department of Public Health identified housing conditions – in particular household crowding – as a major contributing factor for RHD.

Award for U-Owls

The U-Owls social club have won the 2020 Health, Safety and Well-Being Team Award in the annual University of Otago Staff Awards.

The group, made up of staff and students on the Wellington campus, were nominated for their all-inclusive nature and for their tireless efforts to organise sporting and social events to bring people of different backgrounds together as a team.

The group's wide appeal is largely the result of the huge range of activities they offer, from mushroom picking at lunchtime, to dragon boat racing, to weekend walks, knitting and badminton.

U-Owls Co-Leader **Shan Valiyara** says the \$4,000 prize money will be used to organise more fun events in 2021.



The U-Owls team left to right: Fabrizio Facchini, Shan Valiyara (Co-Leader), Marama Cole, Libby McGuire, Sophie Petelaud, Hannah Paris, Ellie Pritchard. Absent: Kealey Sanford, Grace Williams and Olivia Phillipson (Co-Leader, on maternity leave).

PUBLIC HEALTH SUMMER SCHOOL OPEN TALKS

EVENTS

MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY: The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic | The Rt Hon Helen Clark, former UNDP Administrator and Prime Minister of New Zealand.

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY: Risk perception during a COVID-19 'info-demic' and public health challenges for us in the future | Dr Jonathan Jarman, Medical Officer of Health, Taranaki District Health Board.

Both talks start at 5.15pm and will be held in the Nordmeyer Theatre on the Wellington campus and by Zoom. | otago.ac.nz/UOWevents

Endeavour grant for housing research



Sesquicentennial Distinguished Chair, Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman from the Department of Public Health, has been awarded a grant of almost \$12.4 million for research into public housing and urban regeneration.

The grant comes from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's (MBIE) Endeavour Fund, New Zealand's largest contestable research fund.

Professor Howden-Chapman is the director of He Kainga Oranga/ Housing and Health Research Programme and the New Zealand Centre for Sustainable Cities.

Her five-year social research and public well-being project will focus on public housing as a driver of well-being and sustainable urban regeneration.

"I am excited and delighted that our fundamental research on how public housing can further enhance the well-being of households and communities has been recognised," she says.

"In these challenging times, investing in how best to build sustainable communities around warm, dry, safe housing is a wonderful opportunity, and our multi-disciplinary, cross-agency team is looking forward to working together."

Woman of influence



Wellington academic **Dr Sarah Gordon** was named a finalist in the Women of Influence Awards this year in recognition of her courage and determination to improve the lives of others.

Dr Gordon, a Senior Research Fellow and Clinical Lecturer in the Department of Psychological Medicine, was a finalist in the Innovation, Science and Health category of the awards.

Dr Gordon has lived with mental distress since she was diagnosed and admitted to a psychiatric hospital at the age of 17. Despite being advised that a 'return to University would be unwise', she went on to complete four degrees, a Bachelor of Science, a Bachelor of Laws, a

Masters in Bioethics and Health Law and a PhD in Psychological Medicine at Otago.

Dr Gordon has spent the last 20 years drawing on her personal experiences and her academic expertise to advocate for improved mental health services and a change in societal perceptions of mental health.

She now leads the World of Difference education and research programme, aimed at ending discrimination and promoting recovery, inclusion and respect for those who experience mental distress.

HRC supports wide range of research

Researchers from the University of Otago, Wellington have been awarded grants from the Health Research Council to conduct research into a wide range of areas from pain management to oral health.

Dr Hemakumar Devan, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Health, Activity and Rehabilitation Research at the School of Physiotherapy receives a Health Delivery Research Career Development Award to address inequities in pain management for Māori whānau living with chronic pain.

Dr Ngaire Keenan, a Research Fellow in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, has been awarded a Clinical Research Training Fellowship to research the burden of epilepsy on Māori and develop an approach for future research.

Health Delivery Research Activation Grants go to:

Dr Angela Campbell, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Medicine and Manager of the WellSleep Centre, who will look at Māori sleep health across the life span;

Dr Sarah Gordon, a Senior Research Fellow and Clinical Lecturer in the Department of Psychological Medicine, who will work on a mental health project to enable the application of supported decision making in practice;

Dr Moira Smith, a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Public Health, who will assess the oral health sector's organisational commitment to equity.

Journey of connection



Dr Matthew Jenkins is taking on an epic 3,000 kilometre cycle ride from Cape Reinga to Bluff, chatting to New Zealanders along the way about their mental health and passing on specially-designed postcards to help them reconnect with friends and whānau.

Dr Jenkins, a Research Fellow in the Department of Psychological Medicine, is expecting to cycle 120 kilometres a day as he interviews people along the way about mental health.

The interviews and information will be used in the first of a series of podcasts on mental health which he is producing for Access Radio next year.

The art work for the postcard was created by 16-year-old Paige Wilson (Ngāti Rangi, Ngāti Tūwharetoa), the daughter of Client Services Administrator Kristy Wilson, and has been brought to life by the University's Design Services team.

Dr Jenkins began his trip at Cape Reinga on 13 December and is expecting to arrive in Bluff around 15 January.

Follow his journey at www.facebook.com/StokedSpokes or visit the Givealittle page to contribute to postage for a postcard <https://givealittle.co.nz/cause/stoked-spokes>

Academic promotions



Simon Hales

Two academic staff from the University of Otago, Wellington, have been promoted to the position of Professor.

The new professors are **Simon Hales**, from the Department of Public Health, who studies the effects of global environmental changes based on comparisons of health outcome among populations and **Anna Ranta**, the Head of the Department of Medicine, and a Wellington-based neurologist whose research has focused on optimising stroke care in New Zealand and internationally.



Anna Ranta

The promotions were announced by Vice-Chancellor **Professor Harlene Hayne**, who said they acknowledged the academics' hard work and commitment.

"Not only do these promotions honour these individuals and shine a light on their work, they underscore the range of academic talent and expertise at Otago."

Five academics were promoted to the position of Associate Professor: **Angela Campbell**, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Medicine and Manager of the WellSleep Centre; **Ben Darlow**, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice; **Susanna Every-Palmer**, the Head of the Department of Psychological Medicine; **Benjamin Gray**, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice; and **Caroline Shaw**, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Public Health.

The promotions take effect from 1 February 2021.



Offering 24 short courses
1-19 February 2021
otago.ac.nz/uowsummerschool



UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
By Whare Whakatoa o Te Whare
WELLINGTON

Public Health Summer School

The Public Health Summer School, Kura Hauora Ā-Iwi o te raumati, opens on 1 February 2021 with a diverse line-up of one-day courses on offer, ranging from New Zealand's COVID-19 response to 2021 water reforms, to survival skills for health researchers to public health law.

Next year marks the 25th anniversary of the event, with many of the courses having been adapted to take into account the changes the country faces in moving ahead in a post-pandemic world.

The first day of the summer school will finish with an open talk by former UNDP Administrator and New Zealand Prime Minister the Rt Hon Helen Clark on the World Health Organization's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The summer school runs from 1-19 February, 2021. **Early bird rates are available until 22 December 2020**, with an additional 50 per cent reduction on course fees available to staff and students.

otago.ac.nz/uowsummerschool

Alumni and friends

More than 150 alumni and friends gathered on campus in November to listen to University of Otago alumnus and Public Health **Professor Michael Baker** discuss New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy.

The evening provided an opportunity for alumni to learn more about the country's pandemic response, as well as to renew old friendships and meet new acquaintances.

Professors Emeriti Barbara Brookes and Ann Trotter, Chancellor, Dr Royden Somerville QC, Judith Trotter and Dr Tom Farrar.



Cytometer boosts biomedical research

A new state-of-the-art \$400,000 spectral flow cytometer on the Wellington campus is set to significantly enhance the University's capacity to do biomedical research.

The cytometer, which bounces lasers off reagents used to 'tag' the cells in fresh blood or tissue samples, is the first machine of its kind to be installed on any Otago University campus.

Its acquisition was led by Department of Surgery Senior Lecturer **Dr Kirsty Danielson** and Postdoctoral Fellow **Dr Kathryn Hally**, who were able to secure a major equipment grant from the University to purchase the machine.

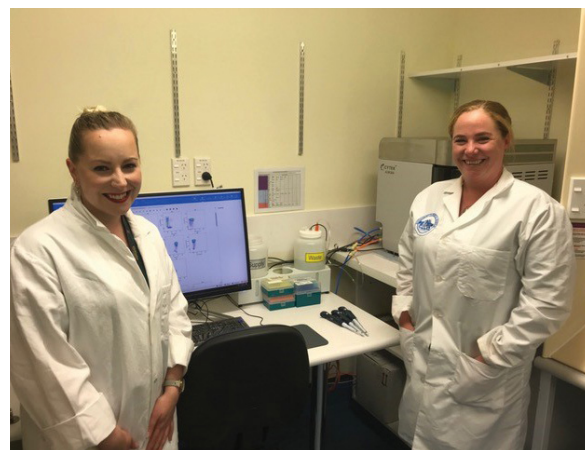
Dr Hally, a leading expert in the technology, says the spectral flow cytometer allows researchers to analyse more than 30 different cell characteristics from a single, tiny, clinical sample.

She uses the cytometer to characterise the levels of inflammation in patients' cells after they experience heart attacks, while Dr Danielson uses it to research how bowel and breast cancer tumours can affect the immune response.

Both are just two examples of the uses to which the cytometer can be put, Dr Hally says.

"We can use it across campus for whichever disease model people want to study."

The cytometer is housed in Collab on Level H. To find out more, contact Centre of Translational Research Manager Dr Rachael Mason, Dr Danielson or Dr Hally.



Dr Kathryn Hally and Dr Kirsty Danielson with the cytometer.