



University  
of Otago  
OTAKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

Pōneke  
Wellington  
Campus

# He Kete Kōrero

University of Otago, Wellington Newsletter | Winter 2026

## Pānui from the Dean

Tēnā koutou katoa

Welcome to the June 2026 issue of He Kete Kōrero.

I've been delighted to have begun the first half of the year welcoming a number of new faces to campus and with a newly refreshed senior leadership team.

**Malaeulu Seuta'afili Associate Professor Patrick Thomsen** joined us as Associate Dean Pacific in March, while **Dr Amanda Collins** has moved into the role of Associate Dean Medical Education. **Dr Cindy Towns** and **Dr Lori Leigh** have taken up the new roles in student support of Associate Dean Academic Progress and Coordinator, Student Care and will be co-located in a newly established student hub area on Level G (7) of the Ward Support Block with the Learning and Teaching Support Unit led by Dr Collins.

Our new leaders are already making significant contributions to the medical education programme, and to campus life and events, including to this year's pride symposium. I greatly appreciated Associate Professor Thomsen's work with Pacific Community Liaison Officer Selafi Tagi to host a fun and educational programme of events for Samoan Language Week this month, with language and dance lessons, film screenings, and a Taste Samoa lunch.

I have been making a series of visits to our regional centres with Dr Collins over the past few months as we work to develop and strengthen our relationships with clinical providers there. These visits are vitally important as having strong connections in the regions will be exceptionally important to our curriculum delivery in the coming years.

I'm very much looking forward to catching up with staff and students next month as we gather to share kai and celebrate the Māori New Year. The theme for Matariki this year is Matariki herenga waka, meaning 'for everyone', encouraging inclusion and celebration together. I hope you will all take the opportunity to come along, to reflect, to remember those who have passed, and to look forward to the promise of a new year.

Mānawatia a Matariki!

PROFESSOR  
WILLIAM LEVACK  
Manutaki | Dean and  
Head of Region



## Connecting with Pride

Staff, students, researchers, educators, alumni and members of the rainbow community gathered on the Pōneke campus in June for a pride symposium focused on improving health and wellbeing.

Almost 200 people came together on campus and online to listen to short talks on the theme of 'Many Identities, Connected Communities: Pride, Culture and Wellbeing'.

Keynote speaker **Malaeulu Seuta'afili Associate Professor Patrick Thomsen**, the Associate Dean Pacific, spoke about co-creating research for Pacific Rainbow+ health and wellbeing in Aotearoa through his Manalagi project.

**Associate Professor Cindy Towns**, the Associate Dean Academic Progress and a consultant physician at Wellington Hospital, discussed cultural safety for the LGBTQ community, while **Dr Lori Leigh**, from the Department of Public Health, shared insights on queer housing and wellbeing.

An update on gender affirming care guidelines and puberty blocker regulations was provided by **Dr Rona Carroll**, from the Department of Primary Health Care, and **Alex Ker**, whose research focuses on the social dimensions of trans people's healthcare equity and social wellbeing.

The final talks of the afternoon focused on curriculum development for the training of health professionals. The speakers were **Mani Mitchell** (MNZM), a change agent and non binary, intersex and queer identifying person, who talked about trust and collaboration; **Jamie Salemink-Waldren**, a fifth-year medical student and rainbow representative for the Wellington Health Professional Students' Association, who shared the findings from his research on health professional students' knowledge and confidence in providing inclusive care to LGBTQIA+ patients; **Cassie Withey-Rila**, a researcher from the Faculty of Medicine – Dunedin, who spoke on 'trans-ing' the curriculum; and **Dr Sara Filoche**, the Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology on the Pōneke campus, who discussed developing a trans and non-binary inclusive undergraduate medical education curriculum framework.

The event, held in international pride month, was hosted by Dean and Head of Region **Professor William Levack**.



Some of the pride symposium presenters in the Nordmeyer Theatre.

## Research funding

Wellington researchers have been awarded grants from external funders to conduct studies in a wide range of fields, including in the areas of migraine, diabetes and cancer.

### Health Research Council

**Associate Professor Paula Toko King** (Department of Public Health) has been awarded a project grant of \$1.2 million to generate an evidence base for effective mātauranga Māori-based preventive models of care for early childhood.

**Dr Rachelle Martin** (Department of Medicine) has been awarded a \$1.2 million project grant to enhance the health system's capacity by developing validated methods for incorporating the voices of disabled people into service evaluation, design and delivery.

**Associate Professor Lesley Gray, Dr Sally Rose** (Department of Primary Health Care) and **Carmen Parata** (Department of Public Health) have been awarded a \$1.2 million project grant to study the acceptability and utility of cervical screening self-tests for big-bodied people.

**Dr Tim Salmond** (Department of Medicine) has been awarded a \$260,000 clinical research training fellowship to examine the role of continuous glucose monitoring in diabetes self-management education.

**Dr Sarah Pirikahu** (Department of Public Health) has been awarded a \$150,000 health delivery career development award to look at who is missing out on antiviral treatment for Covid-19.

### Royal Society Te Apārangi

**Dr John Kerr** (Department of Public Health) has been awarded a \$1.16 million Mana Tūānuku Research Leader Fellowship to investigate the factors that influence the public's attitudes towards government decisions about public health measures.

### Neurological Foundation

**Dr Fiona Imlach** (Department of Public Health) has been awarded a \$300,000 grant to investigate who is missing out on appropriate migraine diagnosis and treatment in New Zealand.

### Cancer Society of New Zealand

**Dr Andrea Teng** (Department of Public Health) has been awarded a \$200,000 project grant to assess the acceptability and effectiveness of the H.pylori screen-and-treat approach used to prevent stomach cancer.

Te Rōpū Rangahau o Te Kāhui Matepukupuku: Cancer Society Research Collaboration has been awarded \$2 million to undertake research and advocacy support for the Cancer Society of New Zealand over five years. The work spans the entire cancer continuum, from prevention to supportive care. Te Rōpū is co-led by **Professor Louise Signal** (Department of Public Health).

### New Zealand Lottery Grants Board

**Dr Caroline Halley** (Department of Medicine) receives \$120,000 to uncover the hidden health risks of mould exposure.

## Digital treasure hunt

Fourth-year medical students kicked off the academic year in Wellington with a digital treasure hunt, using an app to complete a series of serious and not-so-serious challenges as they navigated their way around campus.

The 104 students were divided into teams to make their way around 12 stations, donning fancy dress to conduct mock consultations in the Department of Primary Health Care, 'performing' keyhole surgery using a laparoscopic training unit in the Department of Surgery and Critical Care, and designing an inventive menu for Wellington Hospital's Te Rourou Health Deli café.

Te Whakapounga Orientation Module Convenor **Dr Estelle Jaine** says the treasure hunt may seem light hearted, but it has a serious aim – to help students develop a sense of connection and belonging to each other, to the Pōneke campus, and to the staff they will be working with during their three years of advanced learning in medicine training.

The treasure hunt is based on an app developed by Otago alumnus **Nathan Hollows**, who was on campus to offer technical support.

The orientation activities finished with afternoon tea, with prizes sponsored by MAS – Medical Assurance Society and the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners.



Te Whakapounga Orientation Module Convenor Dr Estelle Jaine and app developer Nathan Hollows.

## The Doctor's Wife

A screening of 'The Doctor's Wife', a documentary about the medical missions to Palestine undertaken by Otago medical school alumnus **Dr Alan Kerr** and his wife Hazel, held in the Nordmeyer Theatre in March drew a large audience of staff, students, alumni and friends to the Wellington campus.

The documentary, by filmmaker Paula Whetu Jones, tells the story of the couple's visits to Palestine between 2001 and 2019, where Alan, a cardiac surgeon, operated on children with heart disease.

The two went on 40 volunteer missions to Gaza and the West Bank, saving the lives of nearly 800 Palestinian children. While Alan was in the operating theatre, Hazel did voluntary work with children in refugee camps, schools and community centres.

The film screening was followed by a Q&A session with Paula, Alan and Hazel.

It was organised by Associate Professor Ben Gray from the Department of Primary Health Care.



## Sharing expertise in emergency management

Researchers and practitioners from Thailand and Aotearoa came together at a symposium on the Wellington campus in March to share their expertise in disaster and emergency management.

The symposium, 'Partnerships across the Pacific Ocean: from Thailand to Pōneke', was attended by the Thai Ambassador and representatives from the Royal Thai Embassy and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

It was convened by **Associate Professor Lesley Gray** from the Department of Primary Health Care and was a celebration of Otago's growing collaborations in the area.

It brought together colleagues and research collaborators from the University of Otago, the Chulabhorn Royal Academy in Bangkok, Thailand, the Joint Centre for Disaster Research at Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa Massey University, Whitireia and WelTec, the National Emergency Management Agency, and Health New Zealand.

The event coincided with the celebration this year of 70 years of formal diplomatic relations between Thailand and New Zealand.



## Summer of research for students

It was a summer of learning and discovery for the 48 students who took part in this year's Summer Studentship research programme on the Wellington campus.

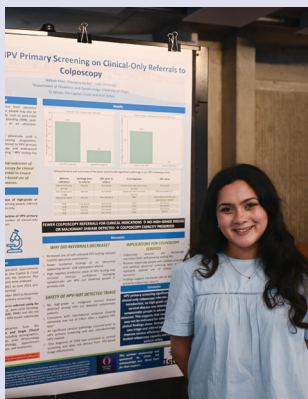
Students worked on a diverse range of projects in the areas of cancer, stroke, arthritis, type 2 diabetes, and chronic pain, as well as in fields such as inclusive care for LGBTQIA+ patients and Aotearoa New Zealand's disaster preparedness, and many others.

The programme is largely supported by philanthropic funding, with four of the studentships funded by the Cancer Society Central Districts Division under a new partnership designed to increase the Pōneke campus's regional research activity through projects focused in Tairāwhiti, Hawke's Bay, Palmerston North and Whanganui.

The campus also launched a new Biostatistics Summer Studentship, which was awarded to **Maria John** for her project 'building collaborative expertise', supervised by **Professor James Stanley** and **Dr Alice Kim**. The studentship is funded through donations from alumni **Len Cook**, the former Government Statistician and **Dr Clare Salmund**, who worked as a biostatistician on the Wellington campus.

The 10-week summer studentship programme finished with a poster presentation on 23 January, where students presented their work.

The overall winner was **Adibah Khan** for her work on colposcopy referrals, supervised by **Dr Judy Ormandy**. Her project was funded by Istar, a charitable organisation set up by alumnae **Dr Carol Shand** and **Dame Margaret Sparrow**.



Adibah Khan with her winning poster.

## Royal Society Fellow

**Professor Michael Baker** (MNZM) from the Department of Public Health has been elected as a Ngā Ahurei Fellow of the Academy of the Royal Society Te Apārangi for outstanding contributions to epidemiology and public health.

The fellowship recognises Professor Baker's achievements in advancing the field of epidemiology, control, and prevention of infectious diseases in an applied research career spanning 35 years.

The Royal Society says his work has provided an empirical base for quantifying the impact of infectious diseases, identifying modifiable risk factors, implementing interventions, and evaluating their impact.

"A common theme has been protecting the public from avoidable infections, and reducing ethnic and socioeconomic inequities, whether for food-borne campylobacteriosis, rheumatic fever and heart disease, or the global Covid-19 pandemic."

Professor Baker says he feels honoured to be elected as a Fellow and is grateful to colleagues, collaborators and communities for their support throughout his career.

He was one of four University of Otago academics to be recognised with a fellowship in April.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) **Distinguished Professor Greg Cook** says the academic staff elected to the Academy have made exceptional contributions across a wide range of scientific fields.

"Their work has delivered profound societal benefits while also advancing scientific knowledge more broadly."



## Sharing whānau cancer journeys

A project in which whānau share their cancer journeys on video has won the inaugural Hei Āhuru Mōwai Whānau Voice Award for best presentation at the World Indigenous Cancer Conference held in Auckland in April.

The research project, Ngā Kōrero Pono (The True and Honest Stories), is a collaboration between the Pōneke campus and Tū Kotahi Māori Asthma Trust at Kōkiri Marae and is led by public health researcher and manager of Tū Kotahi **Cheryl Davies** (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Mutunga ki Te Wharekauri, Ngāti Pikiao).

The videos were developed at wānanga held on marae in the Hutt Valley, Kāpiti Coast and South Auckland. Whānau shared their cancer journeys within a story circle whakawhanaungatanga process, and were then supported to develop and record their stories.

The 12 short videos will be shown to health sector workers, clinicians and policymakers to help them better understand what whānau-centred care truly looks and feels like from the perspective of whānau themselves.



## Academic promotions

**Tristram Ingham**, the Deputy Head of the Department of Medicine on the Pōneke campus, is one of six academic staff at Otago to be promoted to the position of Research Professor.



Professor Ingham (Ngāti Kahungunu ki Heretaunga, Ngāti Porou) is a clinical epidemiologist with decades of experience in healthcare research. His work advances equity across the areas of respiratory health, tāngata whaikaha Māori (Māori disability) and health services' governance.

Professor Ingham led the development of Whāia Te Ao Mārama 2018-2022 (the Māori Disability Action Plan), and is Chair of Te Ao Mārama Aotearoa Trust, a nationwide organisation representing tāngata whaikaha Māori.

He was made a Companion of the King's Service Order (KSO) in the 2025 New Year Honours for services to survivors of abuse in care and in 2024 received the ONZM for services to the disability community.

Two other academic staff from the Department of Medicine, **Dr Cindy Towns** and **Dr Stephen Inns**, were promoted to Associate Professor. **Dr Cristina Cleghorn** from the Department of Public Health was promoted to Research Associate Professor.

The promotions took effect on 1 February.

## In Memorium: Associate Professor Peter Larsen

**Associate Professor Peter Larsen**, the former Head of the Departments of Surgery and Anaesthesia and Radiation Therapy, died on 22 May after a long illness.



He is remembered for his strong sense of integrity and for always believing that the most valuable and rewarding part of his job lay in developing the people he led and taught.

Associate Professor Larsen had a long and distinguished career with the University, completing his PhD in the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia and returning as a Lecturer in 2001 after postdoctoral training in the United States. He taught in the medical and radiation therapy programmes and in the areas of medical technology and science, having a positive impact on many students and colleagues across the campus.

He was Head of the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia from 2015 to 2025 and Head of the Department of Radiation Therapy from 2017 to 2023 and had served as Associate Dean Student Affairs.

He led the Wellington Cardiovascular Research Group and also made substantial contributions to research undertaken by medical colleagues and registrars at Wellington Hospital.

## New appointments

Several new appointments have rounded out the senior leadership team this year, with staff taking up roles in the Pacific office and in student support and medical education.

**Malaeulu Seuta'afili Associate Professor Patrick Thomsen** joined the Wellington campus as Associate Dean Pacific in March. Associate Professor Thomsen led the establishment of the Manalagi Project, a Pacific Rainbow LGBTQIA+ MVPFAFF+ research network funded by the Health Research Council (HRC). He is co-lead on a further HRC project studying mental health service uptake by Aotearoa's Rainbow+ youth. He has a PhD in International Studies from the University of Washington in Seattle and a Master of International Studies from Seoul National University in South Korea.



**Dr Amanda Collins**, an emergency medicine consultant at Hutt Hospital and a Senior Lecturer on the Wellington campus, has been appointed Associate Dean Medical Education. Dr Collins will lead the Learning and Teaching Support Unit (formerly the Medical Education Unit) in the coordination and leadership of medical curriculum delivery on the Wellington campus.



Two new roles have been created in the area of student affairs. The roles of Associate Dean Academic Progress and Coordinator, Student Care replace the previous position of Associate Dean Student Affairs.

**Dr Cindy Towns**, a consultant general physician and geriatrician at Wellington Hospital, a clinical ethics advisor and convener of the trainee intern medicine module at UOW has been appointed Associate Dean Academic Progress. Dr Towns will support medical students who need to access assistance or direction to successfully complete their training.



**Dr Lori Leigh**, a researcher in the Department of Public Health, has been appointed as Coordinator, Student Care. Dr Leigh will coordinate student pastoral care and wellbeing support for all students on the Wellington campus, including in the Faculty of Health Professional Programmes.



## Inside the GP consultation

Otago alumna and general practitioner **Dr Lucy O'Hagan** brought her one-woman show, 'Inside the GP Consultation', to campus in May, giving staff, students and alumni the chance to observe an imagined morning in general practice.



Dr O'Hagan has taken the show on the road to promote her memoir, *Everything but the medicine: A doctor's tale*, in which she talks about her upbringing, her time at medical school, and her more than 30 years of working as a rata hauora/general practitioner.

During the performance, she acts out a morning in a busy general practice, playing the roles of 32 characters, both doctors and patients, allowing her to explore the profound but often complex relationships between the two.

The show was organised by **Dr Emily Cavana**, a GP and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Primary Health Care.

She says while the show has laugh-out-loud moments, it deals with serious themes, which give the audience plenty to reflect on.

"It really is essential viewing for all future doctors, not just future GPs."

### EVENTS

**Thursday, 9 July 8am-9am:** Matariki celebration breakfast for staff and students, Level D foyer

**Monday, 27 July 9am-1:30pm:** Research Showcase, Nordmeyer Theatre

**Wednesday, 29 July 1pm:** 3 Minute Thesis Wellington Heat, Nordmeyer Theatre