



UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, CHRISTCHURCH

# Newsletter

JUNE 2013

CHRISTCHURCH

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## Dean's Welcome

Welcome to the mid-year edition of the University of Otago, Christchurch (UOC) newsletter. I am writing to you from my desk in our refurbished main building. It is wonderful to be back after more than two years of staff and students working from myriad locations during repairs. The building is now enhanced by a Neil Dawson sculpture called "Starferns", which hangs over the main foyer. I invite you to come and view it.

While returning to our building is exciting, there are still building and space challenges ahead. Our Psychological Medicine Department will have to move from their Oxford Terrace building into temporary accommodation for up to two years. We also lost other space in the earthquake aftermath.

We look forward to CERA's announcement about the layout of the health precinct and which site it has allocated for our new building. Construction could begin in 2014.

I was delighted with the success of UOC researchers in the latest Health Research Council's (HRC) funding round. Three researchers – Professors Mark Richards, Lisa Stamp and Peter Sykes each secured in excess of \$1 million for their projects. These projects are explained inside.

The research funding environment is changing with the Government's recent allocation of more than \$70 million to the newly established National Science Challenges. These are 10 areas or challenges – such as ageing well – which research will need to address. At the same time, the HRC received no extra funding. It will be interesting to see the impact of these decisions on UOC researchers who all work towards creating a healthier future for New Zealanders.

UOC's future looks bright with increasing numbers of medical students and postgraduate students. Within a few years student numbers will exceed a thousand.

Regards,

Professor Peter Joyce  
DEAN





Dr Sean MacPherson

**“The songs are a mnemonic to help the students remember and stop my lectures from getting too boring.”**

Haematology is not usually an inspirational subject but Christchurch lecturer Sean MacPherson turns subjects such as anaemia into catchy medical songs.

The haematologist composes songs for his lectures to help medical students remember what he’s teaching.

“The songs are a mnemonic to help the students remember and stop my lectures from getting too boring,” he says.

The talented musician and ex-pat Scotsman uses the piano in the main Rolleston Lecture Theatre to perform his songs but has also employed a ukulele aka Billy Connelly style to get his message across.

MacPherson came to work in Christchurch earlier this year as a University of Otago, Christchurch senior lecturer and Canterbury District Health Board consultant.

He first penned a song about blood thinner Warfarin for a lecture to colleagues about six years ago while working in England.

But when he applied for a job with the University of Otago, Christchurch, the mention of his medical song composition caught the employment panel’s attention.

“They were very interested to hear about my songs. I thought “Oh dear, I’ve only got three songs, if I get the job I better get composing.”

MacPherson has been a pianist since he was five and plays the trombone, guitar and mandolin.

He says his songs need to contain humour to be memorable, but he is careful not to be offensive as the subject matter, particularly conditions such as acute leukaemia are no laughing matter.

MacPherson says students seem to enjoy the lectures but the proof will be in the pudding when exams marks show whether his music has made a difference to their memories.

Missed our 2013  
Public Health Lecture Series?

Watch the lectures at  
[otago.ac.nz/christchurch/news/podcasts](http://otago.ac.nz/christchurch/news/podcasts)



# People

## A musician and medical educator

Professor Tim Wilkinson spends the working week ensuring medical students get the best training possible. In his down time, Tim plays the double bass and has just arranged the second annual New Zealand Doctors Orchestra concert.

Tim, his wife GP Lynette Murdoch and their son, medical student Tom Wilkinson, formed the New Zealand Doctors' Orchestra (NZDO) last year.

It comprises practising medical doctors and medical students from throughout New Zealand.

Dr Tim Wilkinson says his family got the idea to form the orchestra from similar set-ups overseas. His wife plays the violin and their son plays the trumpet.

“The popularity of the orchestra for both players and the audience has exceeded our expectations. One of the purposes of the orchestra is to encourage talented musicians to resume their playing in a high quality orchestra. Playing a musical instrument is also quite an uplifting experience and perhaps proves some relief from quite a stressful work environment.”

Tim's work environment has recently changed. Previously he divided his time being a specialist gerontologist and the Associate Dean of Medical Education at the University of Otago, Christchurch. Recently Tim cut back his clinical time and became the director of the medical student training programme across the University of Otago's three health science campuses in Dunedin, Wellington and Christchurch. Tim says this new position should mean good teaching ideas are shared and new initiatives can be developed that will benefit all campuses.



Professor Tim Wilkinson, Dr Lynette Murdoch and Tom Wilkinson.

# Awards

## Practical help for kidney patients



Dr Suetonia Palmer

*“When our kidneys go wrong, the early signs are usually silent – we get tired, our blood pressure increases, we become anaemic, and we can just feel awful. Unfortunately, when people get kidney disease it’s usually for life. They live with the disease. I realised my role was to be part of their journey, helping them feel as good as they can be and as informed as they can be.”*

Dr Suetonia Palmer works in Christchurch Hospital's kidney unit and is a University of Otago, Christchurch senior lecturer and researcher. She has recently been recognized for her research into best practice treatment for kidney disease, allowing patients, doctors and policy makers to make better decisions. She was the first New Zealander to be awarded a L'Oreal Australia and New Zealand Women in Science Fellowship, won a University of Otago Emerging Researcher with Distinction in Research Award and a Health Research Council Emerging Researcher Grant.

Her ground-breaking work began when she realized information available to doctors working in kidney units was often confusing and sometimes incorrect.

“Often the information used to make decisions is conflicting and is hard to find and make sense of when it is buried amongst the intense output of scientific research,” Suetonia says.

So she set about reviewing millions of bits of information on practice and research into kidney disease from around the world and writing it up as best practice guidelines.

As a result of her work doctors now don't have to hunt around the internet for latest research information and patients get up-to-date advice.

“I believe we can do much more to help people with kidney disease feel better, get back to work, and give them control of their own treatment.”



Professor Mark Richards

Heart failure is common and lethal. A national team of investigators led by Professor Mark Richards has been awarded \$1,195,997 to test a new approach to a form of heart failure that accounts for over a third of cases presenting to New Zealand hospitals, and has no proven treatment. The project could result in fewer deaths and hospital admissions.

Professor Richards heads the Christchurch Heart Institute (CHI), which is based at the University of Otago, Christchurch. This group is made up of scientists and clinicians and is focused on reducing the impact of heart disease in New Zealand.



Professor Peter Sykes

While identification and treatment of precancerous lesions can significantly reduce the risk of cervical cancer, there is also evidence treatment can be harmful, especially for pregnancy outcomes. Some precancerous lesions may also resolve themselves without intervention. Not enough is known about the natural progression, and regression, of CIN2 level lesions. Screening programmes recommend immediate treatment for CIN2 lesions but many colposcopists consider young women should be offered 'observation' as treatment.

Professor Peter Sykes of the University of Otago, Christchurch's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology has received \$1,196,179 to study the outcomes of women under 25 years with CIN2 lesions who were treated conservatively. This multi-centre study will allow specialists to make decisions based on evidence.



Professor Lisa Stamp

New generation anti-rheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) are highly effective when conventional treatment fails for patients with rheumatoid arthritis, but are expensive. They work by targeting specific parts of inflammation pathways. Understanding pathways active in individual patients is required.

Professor Lisa Stamp and her colleagues have developed a pathway classification system and received \$1,199,969 to study whether they can use this system to predict response to bDMARD therapy. It is hoped the study will improve treatment by ensuring patients most likely to respond receive these costly drugs.