

# He Kete Kōrero



WELLINGTON

University of Otago, Wellington Newsletter | Autumn 2020

## Dean's welcome

Tēnā koutou katoa

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

The past few months have been an extraordinary time for the country and for our Wellington campus. When I took up the role as Dean in mid-January it was with the intention of getting to know as many of you as I could through informal face-to-face chats on campus, but I have had to be content with virtual Zoom meetings as we adapted to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would like to thank all the staff who ensured that our transition to working from home was as smooth as possible, including Heads of Department, Associate Deans, academic staff, teaching and research and administration staff, and Senior Manager, Client Services, **Phillip Kane**, who managed the logistics of the campus closure in March.

I am immensely proud of the work which has been done by our world-leading experts to support New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been a wide-ranging effort encompassing research, providing advice to the Government, caring for patients in the clinic and tirelessly communicating the latest information directly to the public and through the media.

It has been a great privilege to have worked with you through this unusual time. I look forward to seeing you all in person as we move back on to campus in a world that looks just a little bit different than it did at the start of the year.

Ngā mihi nui

Professor William Levack  
Dean and Head of Campus



## COVID-19 funding for Wellington researchers

Researchers from the University of Otago, Wellington, have been awarded new Government funding to work on COVID-19 research projects.

**Professor Michael Baker** from the Department of Public Health will receive \$500,000 to research the epidemiology and impact of the pandemic on New Zealanders while **Lesley Gray**, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice, has been granted \$179,904 to look at how ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities could be affecting the ability of New Zealanders to self-isolate.

The funding has been made available through a joint Health Research Council of New Zealand and Ministry of Health initiative to help combat the current coronavirus pandemic and prepare the country for future threats of this type.

Professor Baker's project will bring together a diverse team, led by **Dr Amanda Kvalsvig**, and will include a citizen science project run by University of Otago students that aims to understand lived experience of the pandemic. Photographer and videographer **Luke Pilkinton-Ching** will contribute to the historical record by documenting the pandemic and the response.

Ms Gray's project will provide a comprehensive picture of isolation and physical distancing measures in New Zealand, including an assessment of knowledge, attitudes and practices among a population sample.

Both research projects will gather vital details about people's contact patterns that will inform modelling efforts being used to identify the most effective COVID-19 control options for New Zealand.

The research findings from the two studies will be fed back rapidly to the Ministry of Health to support improvements in how the pandemic response is managed, with a focus on improving effectiveness and equity.



Professor Michael Baker



Lesley Gray



## High-performance meets high-tech

When three professional football players from the Wellington Phoenix visited the Centre for Translational Physiology this summer, it was a case of high performance athletes meeting cutting-edge technology.

The three players, David Ball, Callum McCowatt and Te Atawhai Hudson-Wihongi, were hand-picked by Strength and Conditioning Coach Aidan Wivell to have a DXA or dual energy X-ray absorptiometry scan to assess their body fat, muscle mass and bone density.

The DXA gives Mr Wivell a far more accurate picture of the players' conditioning than he can get with the standard seven-point skin caliper test.

It's also a whole lot faster. Once the players lie face up on the scanner, the process takes just three minutes.

"Getting changed probably takes longer," Centre Manager and Scientific Officer **Dr Rachael Mason** says. "We put them into hospital scrubs because clothing changes the density, and if they are wearing metal, that will appear on the X-ray."

Each of the players is presented with a full written report after the scan which graphically illustrates the precise location of their bone, lean mass and fat mass in graded colours.

Dr Mason says the information gained from a DXA scan is particularly helpful for players in professional sports teams like the Phoenix as it enables them to monitor potential muscle loss over the long season.

The scanner is also used by body builders, distance runners and triathletes as well as by those starting on lifestyle modification programmes who want to track their progress over time.

For more information visit: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/uow-physiology/services/body-composition-scans/index.html>



Dr Rachael Mason and Phoenix player David Ball at the CTP.

## New Year Honour



Endocrinologist and transgender health care specialist **Dr John Delahunt** was awarded the Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit ONZM for services to endocrinology and the transgender community in the 2020 New Year Honours List.

Dr Delahunt retired as a Senior Lecturer in Medicine at the University of Otago, Wellington, in 2018, but remains an honorary lecturer in the Department of Medicine. He graduated MB ChB from Otago in 1966.

Dr Delahunt was one of the first physicians in New Zealand to use gender affirming

hormonal therapy and his award citation refers to the vital role he has played in the development of transgender health care, at a time when transphobia was common within society and the medical profession.

Starting out in the late 1970s, Dr Delahunt says he didn't choose to specialise in transgender, rather that endocrinology management evolved over time and "every 10 years or so some major condition came along", which required a new approach or therapy.

Dr Delahunt says he was "surprised and gratified" that his colleagues had put his name forward for a 2020 New Year Honour.

"I was just doing the job of an endocrinologist, and transgender came along," he says.

## Fulbright New Zealand Scholar

Associate Dean (Pacific) **Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu** has received a 2020 Scholar Award from Fulbright New Zealand to travel to the United States at the end of this year.

Dr Sika-Paotonu will use the opportunity to build and strengthen collaborative linkages with American scientists and scholars.

"It is a privilege to be given the opportunity to travel to the USA and make a research contribution as a Fulbright Scholar," she says.

Dr Sika-Paotonu plans to travel to Harvard University and the University of Oklahoma where she will continue to research acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease, conditions which disproportionately affect indigenous people in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific region.

She will also continue her work supporting the development of a blood test to identify circulating tumour DNA (ctDNA), which could enable cancer to be detected at an earlier stage.

Dr Sika-Paotonu is one of eight academics from six New Zealand universities and research institutions to be selected in the 2020 round.



### EVENT Sustainable Healthcare and Climate Health Conference Aotearoa

This event has been postponed until June 2021, but a webinar series based on the same themes and featuring speakers from the conference will be launched on 16 June 2020. Details will be posted at <https://www.otago.ac.nz/wellington/news/events/otago733079.html> as soon as they are available.

For more news, visit our news page [otago.ac.nz/wellington/news](https://www.otago.ac.nz/wellington/news) and follow us on Twitter @OtagoWellington



Photo: Firas Abussuud

## A message to the world

With a little help from his friends, University of Otago, Wellington, alumnus **Dr Zeid Abussuud** has created a moving video to urge everyone to stay at home and stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Abussuud's *YouTube* video, 'Do it for the whole world: stay at home', includes video footage from a diverse range of people from 45 different countries, speaking in 26 different languages.

"The idea is to deliver a message from the world and to the world about the importance of staying at home in the midst of this pandemic. We wanted to deliver that message from people of different ethnic and career backgrounds and different ages," he says.

Dr Abussuud, who is originally from Saudi Arabia, graduated from the University of Otago with a Bachelor of Surgery and Medicine in 2014, and spent his clinical years in Wellington.

He enlisted the help of dozens of people to make the video. A total of 13 Otago alumni are involved, including 12 who recorded their own video messages and one – UK-based physiotherapist **Hayley Stevenson** – who helped out behind the scenes.

Dr Abussuud worked as a neurosurgery registrar at Wellington Hospital until August last year, and is now living in the UK while he completes a Masters Degree in Trauma Sciences at the University of Birmingham and does research on traumatic brain injury at the city's Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPB8SHUkdCw&feature=youtu.be>

## Through the lens

Two staff from the Wellington campus have had their stunning amateur photography recognised in this year's Otago Bulletin Board Photo Competition.



Photo: Chavi Uduwaka.



Photo: Dr Jude Ball.

**Chavi Uduwaka**, a Research Assistant in the Department of Medicine, is one of 12 photographers who will have their photos displayed in the University Staff Club in Dunedin, and published in the 2021 Otago Bulletin Board digital calendar.

Ms Uduwaka says her photo of the Ponte Vecchio, which she took with her phone through the window of the Uffizi Gallery while travelling in Italy, was the result of her spotting a surprise opportunity.

"It was a quick trip, and sadly I knew I wouldn't have time to see everything, notably the Ponte Vecchio. I was at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and decided to take a quick break after hours of walking. I noticed a small window near where I was resting, which to my surprise was overlooking the Ponte Vecchio – something I thought I wouldn't get a chance to see."

**Dr Jude Ball**, a Research Fellow in the Department of Public Health, had a photo of her nine-year-old daughter Rita Treadgold 'blowing' on a wind-shaped tree selected as one of the Editor's Picks. The photo was taken on a family tramping trip on Banks Peninsula on a beautiful calm day. "We could tell from the shape of the trees what the normal wind conditions were. We couldn't resist the visual joke."

## COVID-19 at first hand

**Dr Rachelle Martin**, a Lecturer with the Rehabilitation Teaching and Research Unit in the Department of Medicine, has described her personal experience of having COVID-19 in an interview with *New Zealand Doctor*.

Dr Martin, who works at the Wellington campus but lives in Christchurch, became New Zealand's 18th case of coronavirus and Christchurch's first, after returning from the UK in March.

She had travelled to the UK to attend conferences in Birmingham and Dublin, but returned home after just six days when both events were cancelled.

Dr Martin developed a temperature on the evening of her return and three days later she was lying in bed, vomiting, while getting advice over the phone from her GP. She felt better soon after and can now laugh about the fact that husband Mike was standing by with a broom in case she lost consciousness and he needed to give her a poke from a safe distance.

Dr Martin says she suffered from a mild form of the illness and her symptoms – which included a high temperature, fatigue, aching body and headaches (but no cough) – disappeared quickly after seven days.





## Virtual library

Connecting staff and students to resources remains a core part of the job for staff at the Wellington Medical and Health Sciences Library who have been working from home while the campus has been closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health Sciences Librarian **Kareen Carter** says staff have used the Library's LibChat channel, email and Zoom meetings to connect with library users, suppliers and networks.

"We have continued to provide access to articles and ebooks for University staff and students and staff from the Capital and Coast District Health Board.

"The reference team has also been working hard to keep staff from the University and the district health board up-to-date with the latest research on COVID-19. This has involved creating and maintaining an EndNote library for a group of researchers on the Wellington campus, which is being updated daily from a wide range of information sources based on expert database searches."

Librarians have also been providing support for students working on research projects and preparing for clinical decision-making assessments earlier in the year than previously planned.



Head of Reference Services, **Donna Tietjens**, assists PhD student **Renan Lopes de Lyra** with a literature search in this Zoom meeting connecting New Zealand and Brazil.

## Pacific Schools' Liaison Officer

The University of Otago's first dedicated Pacific Liaison Officer, **Jack Scanlan**, met with staff from the Wellington campus in March to discuss collaboration between the Schools' Liaison team and the University of Otago, Wellington's Pacific Office.

Mr Scanlan, who is of predominantly Samoan descent, began work in January and is based in the Auckland office.

While in the capital, he met with Associate Dean (Pacific) **Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu**; Pacific Community Liaison Advisor and Pacific Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programme Facilitator **Sepola Faavae**; and Wellington-based Schools' Liaison Officers, **Cheryl Caldwell**, **Prajesh Chhanabhai** and **Margaret Tobin**. The meeting was also supported by UOW's Marketing Adviser **Fran Wright** and Events Coordinator **Faith Atkins**.



Left to right: Jack Scanlan, Prajesh Chhanabhai, Faith Atkins, Cheryl Caldwell, Margaret Tobin, Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu, Fran Wright and Sepola Faavae.

## A summer of (pre-lockdown) fun

Staff and students from the Wellington campus made the most of the summer, taking part in the iconic capital city events, the Round the Bays Fun Run/Walk in February and the Dragon Boat Festival in March.

UOW's participation was organised by the U-Owls team as a way of promoting team-building and staff well-being, with a few laughs and a workout along the way.



Campus administrators Laura Jenner, Sophie Petelaud, Tünde Finan, Purvi Chhaya, Helen Deeble, Marion Clipet and Libby McGuire competed in the Round the Bays Fiji Airways 6.5 kilometre Fun Run/Walk.



The Dragon Boat Festival team was led by Chontelle King and made up of Sophie Petelaud, Dr Christopher Smith, Shan Valiyara, Kerrie Harford and husband John, Libby McGuire, Dr Claire Henry and husband Tristan Myers, Zrinka Kraljevic, Kim Rooke, Carla Strubbia and husband Eric, Billie Mudie, Heather Neil, Dr Hemakumar Devan, Fiona Mathieson, Fab Facchini, Tessa Sherlock, Olivia Pattinson, Louis Pretorius, Nadia Kahan and Olivia de Ronde.

## COVID-19 Focus

Staff from the Wellington campus have been at the forefront of New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, supplying expert advice to the Government, conducting research, and providing information directly to the public and the media.

The first public event was held on campus on 12 February, when Public Health Summer School convenor **Professor Michael Baker** chaired a public talk on 'The emerging coronavirus epidemic', with expert speakers **Professor Nick Wilson** from the Department of Public Health and Professor Raina MacIntyre, from the University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Since then, academic staff have gone on to provide expert commentary on COVID-19 to national and international media, with Professor Baker interviewed by journalists from outlets including the BBC, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

On a policy level, researchers have contributed reports to the Ministry of Health to inform the Government's response to COVID-19. They include a rapid audit of the country's contact tracing capacity performed by infectious diseases physician and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine **Dr Ayesha Verrall**; a series of modelling reports led by Professor Wilson; and surveillance and outbreak analytics produced by Public Health researchers **Dr Amanda Kvalsvig**, **Dr Lucy Telfar-Barnard** and Professors Wilson and Baker and **Lesley Gray** from the Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice.

For a look at the highlights, visit our page of frequently updated COVID-19 content: [otago.ac.nz/wellington/covid19response](https://otago.ac.nz/wellington/covid19response)