Merry Christmas

from the staff and students of the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Otago

## 15th December 2011

As 2011 winds down I thought it would be a good time to reflect on the major developments taking place in Biochemistry. This year's summary was penned collaboratively by Bronwyn and me. OK, mostly by Bronwyn, and reflects a sample of the events throughout the year. We appreciate the opportunity to stay in contact with you through this Christmas letter, and were delighted to receive a number of emails from you in response to last year's offering. It's lovely to hear what you've been doing since you left us.

This year as Director of the Webster Centre for Infectious Diseases, I was fortunate to be part of a team that obtained funding for a PC3 laboratory from the University's large equipment fund. The laboratory is housed in a shipping container. It was made in France, shipped here intact, and lifted onto the Microbiology roof by crane. All air that comes in and out of the laboratory is HEPA filtered, allowing researchers to work on real pathogenic organisms rather than non-pathogenic models. This is one of very first PC3 facilities in a New Zealand academic institution.

In April the Biochemistry Department began operating a Next Generation Sequencing service, providing high-throughput sequencing on the Roche GS-FLX and Illumina HiSeq2000 instruments. In September this facility officially became a service provider for New Zealand Genomics Limited (NZGL), offering a cost-effective sequencing option to the New Zealand genomics research community.

Over the Christmas break the first and second year labs on the first floor of the Microbiology building are being gutted and completely refurbished. This is only the second time in their forty years that these labs have been renovated and we're all looking forward to seeing the finished product - we'll try to remember to put photos in next year's newsletter.

While we cannot boast another Rutherford Medal in the Department this year, staff and students have received a number of lesser scientific awards and a Queen's Birthday Honour.

Warren Tate received the Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. Warren also did the speaking tour of New Zealand that is part and parcel of his last year's Rutherford Medal award, speaking to packed theatres in Nelson, Wanaka, Dunedin, Auckland, Rotorua, Palmerston North and Christchurch.

Catherine Day, Peter Dearden, Liz Duncan, and Kaye Wilson won major awards at the Otago School of Medical Sciences Awards ceremony at the beginning of the year. Catherine Day won the OSMS Distinguished Researcher of the Year, Kaye Wilson won the Distinguished Teaching Fellow, and Peter Dearden and Liz Duncan won the Best Paper of 2010 Award.

Tony Zaharic, the teaching fellow in charge of the first year biochemistry paper, was given a National Tertiary Teaching Award by the Prime Minister, as well as the prestigious Otago Teaching Award, to round off his collection of three Student Teaching Awards.

In the second annual Genetics Otago/Otago School of Medical Sciences poster evening, Rob Day won the Thermo Fisher Ultimate Postdoc award, while in the student categories, Rowan Herridge and Rhesa Budhidarmo took out the Genetics Otago and NZSBMB prizes respectively.

This year it seems as though we have had a constant presence in the media, with Peter Dearden, Julian Eaton-Rye, Warren Tate, and Tony Merriman each featuring in an episode of TVNZ7's science programme "Ever Wondered", and Stephanie Hughes and Warren Tate appearing in segments of Radio NZ National's "Our Changing World".

Russell Poulter appeared in the news, having led a team who sequenced the kiwifruit pathogens that have appeared on vines around the country. PSA was actually confined to kiwifruit vines in the Bay of Plenty and had not spread to the rest of the country as had been feared - a different, non-virulent, bacterium being the cause of leafspots in the South Island and Eastern North Island. Russell has also been awarded two Grand Challenges Exploration grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Both provide opportunities for substantial further funding after preliminary proof of concept.

Parry Guilford received two project grants and Tony Merriman an extension from the HRC, ensuring that their research (on cancer and autoimmune disease respectively) can continue apace, while Catherine Day and Liz Duncan were successful applicants to the Marsden Fund.

Julian Eaton-Rye finished a massive undertaking this year. He has been editing the 34th volume of "Advances in Photosynthesis and Respiration" since 2005. Herding the 76 international contributing authors from 20 different countries has been a sisyphean task, which is thankfully now over. Anyone interested in purchasing this massive tome can do so at www.springer.com/life+sciences/plant+sciences/ book/978-94-007-1578-3.

Most of you will remember Gill Hughes, and at is with great sadness that we say goodbye to her this year. After forty years working as a technician in one lab or another around the Department (for George Petersen for most of her career, but most recently for Liz Ledgerwood) funding for Gill's services has come to an abrupt end. Although grant-funded staff are constantly aware of the precariousness of their positions, it is none the less a shock to have to farewell a much appreciated member of staff after so many years. We wish her the best of luck in her search for future employment.

Mike Legge has been working between this department and Pathology for the last few years so we haven't seen so much of him, but now we will not see him at all - he retired last month and, with his wife, has retired to the wilds of the West Coast and the great outdoors they both love so much.

We have three new members of academic staff this year. Anita Dunbier and Lynette Brownfield arrived to take up new lecturing positions, and Liz Ledgerwood moved from a research only position to take a half time senior lectureship.

In May the Department held a "Three Minute Thesis" competition under the rules of the University's competition, where Masters and PhD students explained their research in a maximum of three minutes with just one slide and with much encouragement and hilarity from the audience. The winner of this event was Katie Hope, who presented work on her MSc on gene therapy using a sheep model of Batten disease; titled "Cure Batten disease! EWE know I can!" The joint runners up were Meaghan O'Neill (MSc) with "Aphids: not just a pain in your grass" and Sharleen Rae (PhD) with "All you need is a Mouse Brain and a Dream"

The department has become so large that we can no longer all fit into the Reading Room for our traditional Christmas "strawberries and champagne" party; for the past few years we have been using the Alhambra Union Rugby Club rooms over at the North Ground instead. The rooms are large enough to provide plenty of space for socialising, and, on warm days, outdoor sporting activities can be attempted. Tradition has been bent in other ways as well; beer and finger food have joined the strawberries and "champagne" on the party menu; we no longer have a Christmas cake-baking member of staff, so we don't have a cake; and several years ago Warren Tate, when HOD, inaugurated the awarding of small prizes to staff who have been excelling in some way, and students who have had publications during the year.

We hope you enjoyed this summary of our year's events and look forward to hearing from you over the next year.

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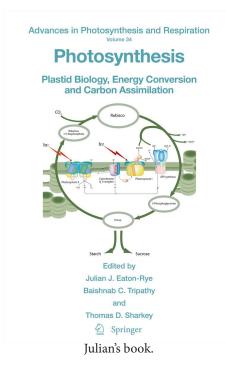
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Best wishes for Christmas and 2012,

from

Kurt Krause and Bronwyn Carlisle, on behalf of

the Biochemistry staff and students



2011 Graduations

This year we had sixteen BSc graduates in Biochemistry, thirty-one in Genetics, and two in Plant Biotechnology; two PGDipSci graduates in Biochemistry; one BAppSci graduate; three DipGrad graduates; five BSc(Hons) graduates in Biochemistry and six in Genetics; three MSc graduates in Biochemistry and six in Genetics; and five Biochemistry PhD graduates.





Warren's Rutherford lectures were given to packed theatres.

A home brew competition was well attended, with some very impressive beers. Watch out **Emersons!** 



students and postdocs did well at the GO/OSMS poster evening. It was held in the new stadium, so we got to check it out (and the Highlanders practising) a bit before the World Cup!

Our



We seemed always to be tripping over microphones and

cameras.





And for something completely different, we had to get the exterminators in to deal with a possum that got trapped in the chemical store. The deceased possum spent the following day perched in the reading room rubber plant.





Murray Cockerill turned 65 this year. We have to spoil him to keep him from retiring.



Katie Hope won the Three Minute Thesis competition.



Sigurd were amongst those receiving awards from Kurt at the Christmas party

Department Publications for 2011

Anthony KG, Strych U, Yeung KR, Shoen CS, Perez O, Krause KL, Cynamon MH, Aristoff PA, Koski RA. (2011) "New Classes of Alanine Racemase Inhibitors Identified by High-Throughput Screening Show Antimicrobial Activity against *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*" *PLoS One*. 2011;6(5)

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