



# CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

*From the  
staff and  
students at  
Otago  
Biochemistry*

## 13<sup>th</sup> December

A second year of pandemic is almost over, and we in New Zealand have had to come to grips with the delta variant being un-stamp-outable. Luckily our delayed vaccine roll out has meant that we are mostly all very freshly vaccinated, so we have not had a huge burst of cases and deaths remain low. On the 15<sup>th</sup> December Auckland's border will open, and we are all keeping our fingers crossed that we remain in some sort of equilibrium.

Here in Dunedin we have had minimal disruption this year, with just three weeks of working from home in August, followed by more or less universal mask use and some social distancing, with semester 2 exams being held online. Despite the country as a whole having moved to the "traffic light" system in November, the university has decided to remain operating mostly at the slightly stricter alert level two until 2022, when a vaccine mandate will come into force. This has meant the cancellation of university graduation events, but Biochemistry is again holding a departmental function for our graduands and their families.

This year has brought very sad news with the deaths of Russell Poulter in January and George Petersen in July. While George had been in failing health for some time, Russell's death was a big shock to everyone. I'm sure you all wish to know how Margi is getting on - she is coping, with the help of daughter Jane, and is still coming in to the Department and continuing Russell's research under the aegis of Sigurd Wilbanks. Obituaries can be read on the Department website, [here for Russell](#) and [here for George](#).



*Dr Louise Bicknell, who arrived early in 2021*



*Dr Nathan Kenny, our most recent new academic staff member.*



*Soon-to-be Professor Mik Black*



*Anita Dunbier will become Associate Professor in February.*

On a happier note, we welcomed two new academic staff members in 2021. In March Louise Bicknell brought her research team over from Pathology to take up a position as Senior Lecturer, while in September, Nathan Kenny and his wife braved MIQ with a toddler and a baby to return to us from the UK on a Rutherford Fellowship-cum-lectureship. Louise's research is on rare genetic disorders, while Nathan is primarily looking at how mussels might overcome the effects of climate change.

Congratulations are in order for Sarah Diermeier, Anita Dunbier and Mik Black, who will become respectively Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, and Professor in February. We look forward to Mik's IPL, date TBA.

Twenty-seven years' worth of Biochemistry undergraduates will be sad/glad to hear that Teaching Fellow Kaye Wilson hung up her lab coat this year, taking a well earned retirement and leaving some very big shoes to fill.



*Kaye's farewell morning tea. The other cake had a slightly more traditional message on it.*

This year has been much like 2020 regarding research funding. Around \$7M has been contracted in total, which includes Marsden Fast Start grants of \$360,000 each for early career researcher Chun Shen Lim and new lecturer Nathan Kenny.

The really big news of 2021 was the announcement of Sarah Diermeier's start-up company Amaroq Therapeutics. Amaroq has been set up to explore the use of long non-coding RNA molecules as therapeutic targets and diagnostic markers in the treatment of cancer. It was launched with investment of \$14M from the Medical Research Commercialisation Fund, managed by life science venture capital firm Brandon Capital Partners, Otago Innovation Ltd, University of Otago, Cure Kids, and NZ Innovation Booster. Sarah also won an Early Career Award for Distinction in Research and was promoted to Senior Lecturer, so 2021 really was her year.



*Sarah Diermeier of Amaroq Therapeutics, newly promoted Senior Lecturer in Biochemistry.*

Building work has moved from the second floor to the third. Our shiny new tearoom/kitchen/meeting room complex was finished and opened in June, complete with a fancy coffee machine that uses real liquid milk and proper coffee beans to make your choice of barista style coffees. We have two dishwashers, three kitchen sinks (one at wheelchair level) and a real stove that has so far been used to make several batches of fundraising morning tea scones, lunchtime baked potatoes, and to heat up morning tea savouries. Pure luxury after that pathetic excuse for a kitchen we survived with for so many decades. The meeting room has been named after George Petersen, and combines meeting/seminar space with museum shelves to show off some of our historic equipment.

Also this year the laboratory space on the north side of the second floor - between the east stairwell and the men's toilets - has been converted to office space for Paul Gardner's bioinformatics group and write-up space for Louise Bicknell's group. The corridor wall is now frosted glass, which affords privacy to the office-dwellers, while letting in an enormous amount of light, making the second floor corridor seem quite bright and cheerful.

The ongoing new building work is a complete upgrade of the third floor, separating write-up space and lab space, removing clutter, upgrading building services, and generally making the use of space more efficient and safety compliant. This should be finished towards the beginning of next semester.



*Glass interior walls between corridor and offices on the second floor let in lots of natural light. You will notice that we have a Christmas decoration competition going on!*

Our pride and joy, the old seminar room, reading room, funny corner office, and "kitchen" have been combined into a flexible space with excellent kitchen facilities.



*Fancy coffee machine with real milk.*



*New tearoom/kitchen from the fire escape corner.*



*Proper stove!*



*New tearoom/kitchen from the corner closest to Chemistry. The glass doors can be opened completely to make one large space.*



*The George Petersen room, from the glass door to the tearoom.*

Dare we wish you the best for 2022? We are certainly hoping for the emergence of a new SARS-CoV-2 variant that's highly transmissible, completely non-virulent, and that will induce a strong immune response against every other variant. Along with everyone else, we are totally over this pandemic!

*Bronwyn Carlisle, Sally McCormick,  
and the Biochemistry staff and students*

For those of you who are interested in our research, a full list of publications can be found on our website [otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/publications](https://otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/publications)

As always, we do hope you will keep in touch, and send us your own news. Come and see us when you are in Dunedin - we will immediately introduce you to the coffee machine and take you on a tour of the almost-completely-refurbished building.

You can keep up with our news during the year from our website on the news page ([otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/news](https://otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/news)), and many years worth of our newsletter archive is also available to download ([otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/news/newsletters](https://otago.ac.nz/biochemistry/news/newsletters)).

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