

MONTHLY UPDATE

DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

11/08/2020

Nothing was further from my mind than a global pandemic and the restrictions on our normal activities that would bring when I took over as HOD in February. It seemed unreal at the time but COVID-19 entering NZ saw many of our plans disrupted (and newsletters left unwritten!). So I reflect on a few significant events from the past few months and those coming up in the near (hopefully COVID-free) future.

Semester one, I suspect, was a blur to most teaching staff as they rallied to get our courses online for the COVID lockdown and beyond. Some innovative teaching strategies were born, rapid upskilling in the use of blackboard and zoom was apparent, and an overall Herculean effort by course coordinators, teaching fellows and support staff saw the Department cope amazingly well. Our online efforts were appreciated by the students, with some excellent feedback from them including in a recent UOO survey regarding our management of final exams. While some important lessons have been learned from teaching online, we are relieved to be back to face to face interactions with our students.

Semester 2 is well underway with some very large classes making it a very busy time for teaching teams, particularly BIOC192 which has to maintain online teaching as well the normal interface. Some student-centred events held recently were our mihi whakatau to welcome the Māori BIOC192 students and our welcome to BIOC majors event, which were both well attended. Our undergraduate student recruitment activities have continued with Biochemistry proving a popular subject in the virtual tertiary day offerings and a steady flux of students and parents to the Biochemistry desk on the real tertiary open day. A big thanks to Miriam and Bronwyn for making the props for these events and also to Sigurd for being the frontman for our talks. Postgraduate recruitment activity is underway with new material being filmed and the PG days coming up in September.

Things were slowed down on the research front as labs had to "down tools" for a significant period of time. However, grants were still written and successfully gained, PhDs and MScs were completed, and a number of new appointments were made in our research labs. While travel restrictions have hit us hard with our usual international conference scene sidelined, some staff and students are delivering research presentations at virtual meetings around the globe. Indeed, our very own QMB meeting has just been announced as a virtual one day meeting on September 1. Budget restrictions have been all around us and I have become a member of the purchasing police firing off daily purchasing approvals to the PVC. So far we have had nothing rejected (touch wood). Keeping with finances, I have just turned my first annual budget in. A big thanks to Catherine for her help in getting my head around things financial and helping me balance the budget despite having to make some significant savings. On a more positive note we look forward to a huge influx of eager young researchers joining us over summer as PIs have been inundated with a large number of 300-level students wanting to work in our research labs.

We have had some significant staff appointments recently with Richard appointed as the academic convenor of CELS and Catherine as the new BMS deputy dean.

Refurbishments are under way with our seminar room gutted and a start on the new tea room imminent. Progress has been made on the plans for the 3rd floor west end refurbishment so we hope to have the finalised plans for that soon.

The social scene in the Department has been a bit limited with only two happy hours so far this year. Despite funding being cut for Christmas and graduation functions, we will still be going ahead with these (hopefully in our new tea room) so anyone with a good idea for raising money to help fund these events please let me know, the usual cake stall and raffles fund raisers have been mooted. In the mean time we have an important event coming up on September 4th which will be followed by a scheduled happy hour, that is the 44th meeting of the Biochemistry Department Research Society's 400-level Research presentations. Please come along and hear about the 2020 research effort from our newest PG students, who have been faced with a difficult year.

Mid-semester break is nearly upon us and I hope some of you are able to take a few days R and R to recharge your batteries before the final push towards the end of what has been an extraordinary year.



S.P.A. McConnaughy

Equipment

After more than a year of consideration and negotiation via the Procurements office that runs external tendering, Biochem has its new autoclave getting commissioned.

The old Astell English made autoclave on the ground floor has been superseded by a Spanish Matachana, with significantly more capacity.

It is bitter sweet in many ways, since while the old one had a few hiccups mid last year, it has been running really well for the last month or two. However it was getting to the point where the age meant certain custom parts were no longer available.

Bitter also may describe the feelings many researchers have around this, because although we pushed to get it invoice before the end of last year, the cost had not been paid by the time covid struck, so this single large purchase has soaked up quite a lot of our equipment allocation for the entire year.

Sweet though, in that it is shiny and new ('shite and briney' as Peter F. says) will make life easier for those who have to maintain it, and should significantly ease the burden of the staff who are processing the lab waste.

Stores and Ordering

The E-freezer will no longer stock NEB enzymes, these are now ordered directly from NEB. Due to possible freight charges orders will be placed on Thursday each week.

Lynn has now moved downstairs to the North Hub purchasing office – G11. The other people there are Jo Preston (lead), Justine Foster, Martin Quinn & Claire Johnson. You are welcome to pop in.

Postgrad degree completions

Sarah MacKie (MSc) Dunbier Lab, has accepted a job at Kings College, London where she will be working on leukaemia.

Beth Jose (PhD) Gardner Lab, is doing some contract work for Iain and others

Attika Rehman (PhD) Lamont Lab. Attika is now working as a post-doc 50/50 for Iain and Chris Brown, going to 100% Chris Brown next year.

Ted Keats (MSc) Krause Lab. Kurt says Ted was doing some contract work for Callaghan Innovation in Wellington.

Andrej Paluda (PhD) Day Lab, Andy is doing some work for Catherine, at least until Christmas.

Priyal Dass (MSc) Lamont Lab. Priyal is currently an ARF in Pharmacology

Judy Ann Cocadiz (MSc) Guilford Lab, is now doing a PhD, still with Parry.



Recent grant successes

HRC

Catherine Day for her project grant "Time for destruction - switching immune responses off"

Megan Leask for her Emerging Researcher First Grant "Decoding GWAS to combat renal disease in Maori and Pacific people"

Neurological Foundation of New Zealand

Stephanie Hughes for her project grant "Identifying superheroes in neurodegenerative disease"

Indranil Basak for his project grant "Charting new neuronal survival pathways in Parkinson's disease"

Megan Leask also obtained an **UOO Te Poutama Māori Advancing Research Collaboration Grant** for "Investigating links between bone mass, metabolic traits and appetite in Maori"

Debina Sakar was awarded a **Maurice and Phyllis Paykel Trust** grant for "Investigation of potential Ev-associated hMaTARs as diagnostic/prognostic biomarkers for breast cancer"

New arrivals

Mathew Powell is a Professional Practice Fellow while Nicole is on parental leave.

Mandana Baharlou Houreh is a PhD student in the Brown Lab - photo next time



Dr Wenhua Wei is a Senior Research Fellow in the Merriman Lab



Dr Karen Knapp is a Scientific Officer in the McCormick Lab part-time and the CPR Unit part-time



Devon Bull is a PhD student with Anita Dunbier



Dr Golnoush Madani is a new post-doc in the McCormick Lab



Aime Siemonek is a new PhD student with Anita Dunbier



Nathan Russell is a PhD student with Mik Black, based at ESR in Porirua.



Alice McAtamney is a PhD student in the Guilford/ Black Labs.



Damien Févre is a PhD student in the Dearden Lab



Dr Ashley Campbell has returned to post-doc in the Krause Lab