



CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

*From the staff and students at
Otago Biochemistry*

14th December

We hope this alumni letter finds you all healthy and still gainfully employed – something we have more or less taken for granted in previous years, but is a real issue in 2020. We have been so very lucky in New Zealand; with the exception of our national seven week lockdown in March-May and Auckland's level 3 blip in August, our lives have been more or less normal. We have all watched with concern the progress of the pandemic in the rest of the world though, and we send heartfelt best wishes to those of you who have been more severely affected than we have.

The Covid-19 pandemic is, naturally, the most significant event of 2020 for the Department. Between the 23rd and 25th of March, those of us who could packed up our offices and transported their contents home with us and set up “working from home” spaces. Experiments were put on hold or aborted as required, and equipment was temporarily mothballed. During levels 4 and 3, from the 25th March to the 13th May, Zoom and Microsoft Teams were our means of communication. Lectures were given and recorded, and meetings held via Zoom. Recorded lectures were uploaded to the internet for ongoing student access, and Zoom was again used for Q&A sessions/tutorials. The university introduced a new unlimited Covid-19 leave category for us to use when/if we were unable to perform 50% of our duties from home, but our salaries continued to be paid regardless so we had no worries regarding personal finances. We listened avidly to the 1pm daily Covid-19 briefing from the Ministry of Health, and our weekly excitement was the permitted trip to the supermarket. The one exception to this régime was Nigel Alefosio, our storeperson. Nigel continued to come to work every day, collected mail and freight deliveries and made sure everything in the building was safe until mid-May when we all returned under level 2 conditions.

Uncertainty as to what future weeks might bring dictated that semester one exams would all be taken online. This meant some considerable extra work for teaching staff, as exams had to be rejigged to permit an open book format. Examsoft was enabled to detect cheating in online first year exams, and SafeAssign (a plagiarism checker) was widely utilised for the open book exams. The big plus of online exams became evident during marking – no scrappy handwriting to try to decipher, everything was typed and easy to read.

Despite the interruptions, 2020 has been another good year for the Department regarding funding. Over \$5M has been contracted in total, and early career funding successes include research fellows Adam Middleton and Megan Leask. Adam was awarded a \$600,000 Sir Charles Hercus Health Research Fellowship as well as a share in \$1.2M (with Catherine Day) to investigate the role of ubiquitin in the immune response to viral infection, and Megan was awarded an HRC Emerging Research First Grant of \$250,000 to investigate genes associated with chronic kidney disease and gout in Māori and Pacific people.

Among the scholarships awarded to our postgrad students, two in particular stand out. Anežka Hoskin (Ngāti Porou) has won a Fulbright scholarship, and will start her PhD in genetics at Stanford University in September next year, while Jennifer Palmer has won a Cambridge-Rutherford Memorial PhD Scholarship and is off to Cambridge to study neurodegenerative disease. Jenni has had a particularly challenging university career, having been diagnosed and treated for Hodgkin's lymphoma during her undergraduate studies – and coming top of her class every year during the process. She is now in full remission and can spare energy from excelling academically for running marathons and climbing mountains.

It has recently been announced that Chris Brown will be promoted to Associate Professor in February 2021. Some of you will remember Chris from his time as a PhD student in Warren Tate's lab in the late 1980s and subsequently as lecturer. Warren himself became “Emeritus Professor” in July this year. His teaching responsibilities have ended, but he still continues with his research in the Department. We put together a special newsletter for the occasion that you can [access on the Department website](#). Richard Macknight, whose promotion to Professor took place in February, gave his IPL in November. [It is available for viewing on YouTube](#).

We said farewell to Tony Merriman in October. He is now a professor at the University of Birmingham, Alabama where he will continue studying the genetic basis of gout, but with a stronger clinical focus at the University hospital. He still has a presence here, with his lab continuing to run under the aegis of his wife/research partner Marilyn, who is staying in Dunedin while the Covid-19 pandemic precludes easy travel.

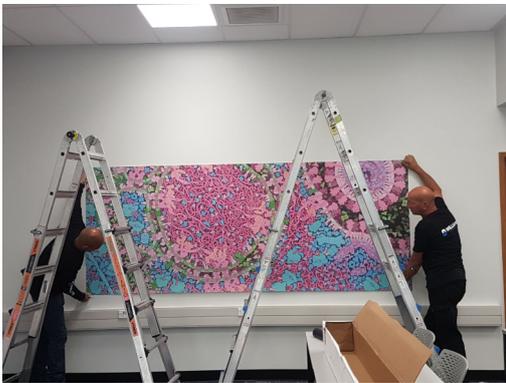


Tony wearing and examining some of his parting gifts

Catherine Day has moved on from being our Department head to become the Deputy Dean of the School of Biomedical Sciences, and Stephanie Hughes, whose research focusses on neurodegenerative diseases such as Batten disease and Alzheimer's, was this year appointed Director of the Brain Health Research Centre, a collective of 240 multidisciplinary researchers and clinicians across 44 laboratories in the University of Otago.

We are once again working in the midst of a building site. The space formerly occupied by the Departmental seminar room, the reading room, the kitchen, and Bronwyn and Miriam's office, is in the middle of a massive upgrade. They have all been knocked into one big space that will be split by sliding doors. We will be able to have one large function room at need, and with the doors closed we will have a decent sized meeting room and a good staff common room with a brand new kitchen. We had hoped this would be finished in time for this year's Christmas party, but as usual things are running a bit late. In 2020 the strawberries and cream are going to be eaten in the new ground floor seminar room.

On the subject of which, we have finally had some artwork installed in the new seminar room. At the end of last year we had chosen a pair of David Goodsell paintings of nerve cells in the "on" and "off" molecular conformation to get blown up to mural size for one of the walls. That plan got put on hold during lockdown, and once we were back at work we thought we'd use something a bit more topical instead. We now have a 2x3 metre print of the David Goodsell painting of the coronavirus life cycle on the wall to look at in seminars and meetings. If you are not familiar with his work, check out [his Gallery at the PDB](#). He very generously allows his art to be downloaded and reused.



Left: the men from Williams Signs + Graphix installing the mural, Right: the completed installation.

Art of a different type is also on our minds at the moment. Johanna Zellmer from the Art School at Otago Polytech has been repurposing some of the laboratory waste from the Otago Genomics Facility on the third floor. She has made quite a collection of small items, and is putting on a small scale exhibition in the Department over summer.



Otago polytechnic jewellery & metalsmithing lecturer Johanna Zellmer with her exhibition of artworks created from laboratory waste. Even the display cases were created from old chilly bins and icepacks.

To mark the University's 150th celebrations, a new yellow hybrid tea rose was developed by Glenavon rose breeder Rob Somerfield. The university received the first 150 plants, 50 of which have been planted around the university, making cheerful splashes of yellow amidst the white flower carpet roses by the Leith, and the other 100 used as gifts. The rose is available to the public from [Wairere Nurseries](#), who have an excellent mail order service for those who cannot shop in person.



The University of Otago rose

We have yet another update on everyone's favourite watering hole, The Cook - it continues as before with a music venue upstairs and Sal's Pizza downstairs, and the building itself is still *The Captain Cook*, but the music venue has been renamed *Dive*. This was, in the words of owner Mike McLeod, "in the wake of a global backlash against systemic racism and white privilege", and provoked a certain amount of criticism. But we can probably all agree that *Dive* is an eminently suitable name for the place formerly known as "upstairs at the Cook".

Resilience has certainly been the key word for us this year, the first of Sally McCormick's tenure as Department Head. As if a coronavirus pandemic wasn't enough, December's graduation ceremonies have had to be postponed due to a security threat that was received by the University. Details of the threat have not been divulged, but it was serious enough to cancel the graduation parade at 15 minutes notice. We were, however, able to organise an impromptu celebratory event for our students later in the day, at which they were presented with "swag bags" containing branded coffee mugs, T-shirts, and sunhats. Not quite the same as walking across a stage in front of the university big wigs, but better than nothing.

Best wishes for a much improved 2021,

Bronwyn Carlisle, Sally McCormick,

and the Biochemistry staff and students



Biochemistry branded "swag"

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

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 be particularly pleased to see any alumni from outside New Zealand once our border restrictions are eased. You never know, you might come away with samples of our new "swag" collection!

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

Email your news to: biochemistry@otago.ac.nz

Post your news to : The Secretary, Department of Biochemistry, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

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