



University  
of Otago  
OTAKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

Pōneke  
Wellington  
Campus

# He Kete Kōrero

University of Otago, Wellington Newsletter | Summer 2024

## Pānui from the Dean

Tēnā koutou katoa

Welcome to the December 2024 issue of *He Kete Kōrero*.

It feels good to have reached the end of another successful, challenging and momentous year.

One of the major highlights this year has been the reopening of the Nordmeyer Lecture Theatre, giving us back a space for teaching, learning, connecting and celebrating.

The theatre has been used for many special events over the past few months, including the reunion of the Otago Medical School Class of '79 alumni, our Hui Whakanui Tauira Student Awards Celebration and our staff awards ceremony. It is a joy to be able to host these uplifting and positive events and share the campus with alumni, hospital staff, and students and friends of the University.

I am delighted to be able to congratulate those of our academic staff whose promotions to Professor and Associate Professor have been announced this month. Our recent staff awards highlighted how exceptional the staff on the Wellington campus are, bringing dedication, creativity, diversity and expertise across so many different areas to our workplace.

Next year the Otago Medical School will hold a 150th anniversary event over King's Birthday weekend in Dunedin, and I look forward to being able to share details of a Wellington campus event soon where we can celebrate this major milestone.

It has been quite a year! I hope you can all take some time to pause for rest and relaxation over the holiday period.

Meri Kirihimete

PROFESSOR  
WILLIAM LEVACK  
Manutaki | Dean and  
Head of Campus



## Celebrating student success

Wellington students and staff gathered in the Nordmeyer Theatre last month for the end of year Hui Whakanui Tauira Student Awards Celebration.

The hui celebrated the special achievements of fourth, fifth and sixth year medical students and postgraduate students and provided an opportunity to farewell the graduating medical class.

The procession into the theatre was led by student mace bearer **Hotene Ngaropo-Tuia** (Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Manu), the president of Ngā Puna Hauora, the Māori Health Professionals Students' Association.

Staff and students were greeted with a mihi whakatau by **Toa Waaka**, Rautaki Hononga Māori, and by Dean and Head of Campus **Professor William Levack**. **Dame Karen Poutasi**, the former chair of Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand, was guest speaker at the event, with student addresses given by the co-president of the Otago Postgraduate Association Wellington (OPAW), **Emily Paterson**, and the president of the Wellington Health Professional Students' Association (WHPSA), **Georgia Hoggarth**.

The honour of wearing the kākahu was bestowed on **Hotene Ngaropo-Tuia** in recognition of excellence in leadership and perseverance in raising the level of commitment and achievement of others. He was presented with the Vera Keefe-Ormsby Prize in Māori Health for leadership and scholarship in Māori Health.

The Pacific Research Prize went to **Ainsleyana Puleiata** and the Pacific Leadership Award went to Agnes Valasi.

The Fowler Scholarship in Medicine for 2024 was awarded to **Eric Gromme**.

Two surprise awards were made on the night. Presentations for their commitment and tautoko to sixth-year Tauira Māori were made to Associate Dean, Māori, **Bridget Robson**, and to **Dr Jake Aitken** from the Eru Pōmare Māori Health Research Centre. An award for outstanding service to Wellington postgraduate students was presented by students to **Emily Paterson**.

The full list of winners will be posted on the Wellington campus website.



Medical students at the awards ceremony.





# Welcome Waka

Staff on the inaugural Welcome Waka in August.

Staff on the Wellington campus are joining Welcome Waka trips to visit places of local significance around Wellington.

The journeys are open to new and existing staff, and are expected to be held on a regular basis, with the first trip held in August, and a second in November.

The trips offer an orientation to the area, and are designed to connect staff to the community and begin the process of establishing tikanga and campus values.

The days begin with a mihi whakatau from **Toa Waaka** (Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Te Atiawa, Ngāti Mutunga), the Wellington campus Rautaki Hononga Māori – Māori Strategic Framework Project Manager. The welcome is followed by whakawhanaungatanga exercises to make connections and build relationships and the opportunity for staff to introduce themselves with their own pepeha.

The trips are guided by Toa and **Stephen Kenney**, Pou Rautaki Māori - Strategic Manager, Māori at Porirua City Council.

## Career celebration



There was much laughter and reminiscing at an event held to celebrate the career of retiring Primary Health Care and General Practice **Professor Tony Dowell** in September.

Tony has been a member of the Department since 1997, when he arrived from the UK to take up the role of inaugural Chair of General Practice and Head of Department. He remained as Head of Department until 2010, and served as

Deputy Dean of the Wellington campus for almost 10 years.

Head of Department **Professor Lynn McBain** described Tony as a consummate academic, a teacher who communicated information and ideas to suit his audience, and as a 'research magnet', in attracting research projects.

"As a leader, he has qualities that make us want to come to work each day. He is attentive, personable and warm hearted. He provides excellent advice and support and acts as a mentor to many."

Dean and Head of Campus **Professor William Levack** said Tony had had a significant impact on the Wellington campus and across the whole University, describing him as the 'fix it guy'.

"Whenever there is work to be done, he is almost always the first to put his hand up to do it, and so he's been an absolute asset when it comes to a complex campus like this."

Colleague **Associate Professor Ben Darlow**, who had Tony as his PhD supervisor, described him as a partner in crime, a colleague, a mentor, ally, encourager, and friend.

He paid tribute to Tony's endless curiosity, perpetual positivity, enthusiasm and mischievous sense of humour.

## Blues and Golds Award

Wellington postgraduate student **Emily Paterson** has won a Silver Service Award in the University of Otago's annual Blues and Golds Awards for her leadership of the Otago Postgraduate Association Wellington (OPAW).

The awards, coordinated by the Otago University Students' Association (OUSA) in collaboration with the University, were presented at a ceremony in Dunedin in September. They recognise the highest degree of sporting, cultural, community and arts achievements among students.

Emily is a PhD candidate in the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia where she is investigating novel diagnostic tools for the diagnosis of endometriosis.

She is a founding member of OPAW and has been co-president since it was set up in 2021.

Over the last three years she has led initiatives to improve health and wellbeing for students, build whakawhanaungatanga and enhance connections with staff.

Her work has been instrumental in securing access to subsidised GP visits and on-campus counselling services for postgraduate students and in gaining funding for 'Shut Up and Write' sessions to be held on the Wellington campus once a month.

She acknowledged the work of fellow Wellington postgraduate students **Ryan Sixtus**, **Tom Bergen**, and **Helena Abolins-Thompson** who have taken turns to share the presidency of OPAW, and of **Carla Strubbia**, who was instrumental in founding OPAW.

Emily was also awarded a special prize by Wellington students at the Hui Whakanui Taira Student Awards Celebration in November for the exceptional support she has provided to postgraduate students.



## Research grants

Wellington researchers have won external funding for studies in a wide range of areas from smokefree policies to the impacts of working with abnormal uterine periods.

### Health Research Council grants:

**Professor Janet Hoek**, **Associate Professor Andrew Waa** and **Professor Richard Edwards** from the Department of Public Health have been awarded a programme grant of \$5 million to continue evaluating whether the measures taken to achieve the Smokefree 2025 goal are effective for all population groups.

**Dr David Lewis** from the Department of Medicine has won a \$260,000 Clinical Research Training Fellowship to examine complication rates and metabolic health in young adults with type 2 diabetes.

**Dr Kathryn Hally** from the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia has been awarded a Health Delivery Research Activation Grant of \$30,000 to look at detecting perioperative myocardial injury in vascular surgery.

### Lottery Grants

**Dr Parimala Kanagasabai** from the Department of Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Women's Health has been awarded \$119,000 to look at the impacts and costs of working with abnormal uterine periods.

## Award for transformative work with Māori

Public health researcher, **Cheryl Davies** (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Wehiwehi, Ngāti Mutunga ki Te Wharekauri), has been awarded the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC)'s Te Tohu Rapuora Medal for transformative work in Māori communities.



The medal was presented at a Royal Society Te Apārangi Research Honours awards ceremony in Wellington on 28 November.

The HRC says her work as founder and manager of the Tū Kotahi Māori Asthma Trust at Kōkiri Marae in Wellington has made a tangible difference to improving health outcomes.

Ms Davies set up the trust in 1995 to provide asthma education and advocacy services to whānau in the wider Wellington region.

The work soon extended into health research, initially in helping recruit Māori to participate in studies by the University of Otago, and then to participating in all areas of the research process.

Ms Davies says her guiding principle for working with Māori communities is to “do what you say you’re going to do, and work with integrity”.

She has worked with a number of groups on the Wellington campus, including the Eru Pōmare Māori Health Research Centre, He Kāinga Oranga/Housing and Health Research Programme and the Cancer and Chronic Conditions (C3) research group. Her work has encompassed studies on chronic pain with **Dr Hemakumar Devan** from the Department of Medicine, research on asthma with **Bernadette Jones** from the Department of Medicine, and healthy homes projects with He Kāinga Oranga Co-director **Distinguished Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman** and her team.

---

## Early career research award

Wellington public health researcher **Dr Jude Ball** is one of only six staff across the University to win an Early Career Research Award.



This year’s winners were selected because of the potential their research had for making a positive impact on local and global communities.

Dr Ball has built a national and international research profile in youth public health research, showing exceptional leadership in the field.

She has spearheaded ground-breaking research in two areas: documenting and investigating a major decline in adolescent risk behaviours that has occurred internationally since 2000; and conducting research to inform interventions to reduce youth drug harm, with a particular focus on smoking, vaping and alcohol harm.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) **Professor Richard Blaikie** says selecting the winners from the many high achieving researchers nominated for the awards could be challenging.

“Ultimately, these academics stood out as they not only demonstrated themselves to be very capable researchers, but they are also showing ways in which their research will go on to have major impact in the lives of people and communities.”

Each of the winners receives a \$5,000 research grant and membership to the Otago Early Career Researcher Forum, which promotes the research of early to mid-career academics at Otago and provides collaboration and networking opportunities.

## Significant firsts for Pacific academic

**Associate Professor Dianne Sika-Paotonu**, an immunologist on the Wellington campus, and the Associate Dean, Pacific, in the Division of Health Sciences has been appointed as Otago’s inaugural Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pacific.



Of Tongan descent, Associate Professor Sika-Paotonu is the first Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pacific, to be appointed at Otago, but also the first to be appointed at any university in Aotearoa New Zealand. She starts in her new role on February 1, at which time she will also be appointed as a Professor.

Announcing the appointment last week, **Vice-Chancellor Grant Robertson** said it was a historic appointment which recognised the significance of the role of Pacific staff and students, and the University’s relationships with Pacific communities in Aotearoa and in the region.

“We are delighted to be appointing someone of Dianne’s standing and calibre to this new role. It is key to enabling Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka to build on its achievements to date and strengthen its commitment to being a truly Pacific university, supporting the achievement and success of Pacific researchers, teachers and students.”

Associate Professor Sika-Paotonu says it is a tremendous honour to be appointed to the role.

“I acknowledge the hard work, commitment and advocacy of many who laid important foundations to enable a significant leadership role such as this to be instituted for the first time within Aotearoa New Zealand.”

In another significant first, Associate Professor Sika-Paotonu is the first Pacific scientist to be awarded the Royal Society Te Apārangi’s Callaghan Medal for science communication.

The award, presented in Dunedin in November, recognised her evidence-based science communication and her engagement efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific region.

The judging panel described her as an exceptional communicator who focused on her areas of expertise, was highly empathetic and engaging and aware of the needs of her audience.

---

## Research Themes

Two groups from the Department of Public Health in Wellington have been selected as Research Themes in the University of Otago’s latest funding round.

The Health Protection Aotearoa Research Centre (HPARC) receives Research Theme funding for the first time. The group, directed by **Professor Michael Baker**, is dedicated to researching ways to reduce the harm from Covid-19, rheumatic fever, and other infectious disease and environmental health threats. The centre is made up of **Professor Nick Wilson, Professor Simon Hales, Associate Professor Amanda Kvalsvig** and **Dr Julie Bennett**.

The ‘ASPIRE Aotearoa: Achieving a nicotine free future’ group of **Professor Janet Hoek, Professor Richard Edwards** and **Associate Professor Andrew Waa** also receives funding through the round, building on its established track record of collaboration as a research centre.

The Research Themes are interdisciplinary groups of academics researching areas of key strategic importance for the University, the country and the world.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) **Professor Richard Blaikie** says the interdisciplinary Research Theme approach will help build research capacity by focusing efforts and resources.

Fourteen Themes have been selected in this 2025-28 funding round, with each successful Research Theme receiving \$25,000 a year for the next four years.



## Class of '79 reunion in Wellington

Class of '79 Wellington graduates.

A reunion of the Otago Medical School Class of '79 in October gave the first-ever group of students to complete their study on the Wellington campus the chance to catch up with old friends in the Nordmeyer Theatre where they attended some of their first lectures.

The graduating class of 1979 were the first to be able to complete their fourth, fifth and sixth years of medical school in Dunedin, Christchurch or Wellington.

Reunion organiser, retired anaesthetist **Dr Graham Sharpe**, says the Wellington cohort started just as the clinical school opened. "It was fantastic, with a new library and lecture theatres, it was great."

The event was held over the weekend of 18-20 October, with 108 people, including partners, attending.

The group was welcomed onto campus by the Dean and Head of Campus, **Professor William Levack**, and then heard from a

range of speakers, including the president of the Wellington Health Professional Students' Association (WHPSA), trainee intern **Georgia Hoggarth**.

Since 2005, Class of '79 alumni have been funding scholarships for second and third-year undergraduate medical students experiencing financial hardship. A former recipient, Dr Melissa Dol, now a senior house officer in the Wellington Hospital Emergency Department, spoke to those at the reunion about the difference the scholarship had made to her life.

Alumni at the reunion included current Otago staff members, **Associate Professor Ben Gray** and **Adjunct Professor Richard Beasley** from the Wellington campus and **Professor Rob Walker** from the Dunedin campus. Retired Dunedin School of Medicine academic **Dr Mike Hunter** also travelled to the event.

## Academic promotions



Angela Ballantyne



Ben Darlow



Eileen McKinlay



Maria Stubbe



Jason Gurney

Academic staff from the Departments of Primary Health Care and General Practice, and Public Health have been promoted to the roles of Professor and Research Professor, a reflection of the meaningful contributions they have made to the advancement of learning and knowledge.

Four staff from the Department of Primary Health Care and General Practice are promoted to the role of Professor: **Angela Ballantyne**, a bioethicist specialising in human research ethics and feminist bioethics who also writes on ethical issues related to clinical practice, data sharing and public health; **Ben Darlow**, a musculoskeletal physiotherapy specialist, whose passion is

supporting people to participate in healthy active lives, particularly when they have back or joint pain; **Eileen McKinlay**, a registered nurse who researches interprofessional collaborative practice in healthcare delivery; and **Maria Stubbe**, a social scientist and applied sociolinguist, who has published widely on research relating to health communication, health services, workplace language and discourse analysis.

**Jason Gurney** (Ngāpuhi), an epidemiologist and Director of the Cancer and Chronic Conditions (C3) Research Group in the Department of Public Health has been promoted to the role of Research Professor. Since joining the University in 2011, his

research has focused on describing and understanding disparities in health outcomes between Māori and non-Māori.

Four staff are appointed Associate Professor: **Fiona Mathieson** and **Paul Skirrow** from the Department of Psychological Medicine, **Kirsty Danielson** from the Department of Surgery and Anaesthesia, and **Rosemary Hall** from the Department of Medicine. **Bernadette Jones** (Ngā Wairiki, Ngāti Apa) from the Department of Medicine and **Julie Bennett** from the Department of Public Health are appointed to Research Associate Professor.

The promotions take effect on 1 February.



Wellington staff travelled to Dunedin to take part in the Pacific welcome for the new Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Health Sciences, Associate Professor **Megan Gibbons** (Ngāpuhi) which was held at the Va'a o Tautai | Centre for Pacific Health in September. Pictured at the event are Associate Professor **Dianne Sika-Paotonu** (front left), Professor **William Levack** (front right), Pacific Community Liaison Adviser **Selafi Tagi** (back row, fourth from right) and **Rautaki Hononga Māori – Māori Strategic Framework Project Manager Toa Waaka** (back row, third from right) with Associate Professor **Gibbons** (front centre).