

Welcome to the eighth issue of the New Zealand Medical Student Journal (NZMSJ). In addition to the usual high quality array of peer-reviewed student research and topical opinion pieces which the journal has a long established history of providing the medical student community, we are pleased to present the first ever issue of the journal containing a selection of articles centred around a theme, in this case, rural medicine in New Zealand.

Below are some thoughts on the importance of this issue from Dr Pat Farry, director of the University of Otago's Rural Medical Immersion Programme:

Overseas, it is well recognised that there is a world wide shortage of doctors, especially those working in smaller rural communities, which are particularly vulnerable because the loss of one doctor in a region can lead to a breakdown of services. This vulnerability does not only apply to rural primary care but also to rural secondary care services. Despite this, there have been until recently very few major workforce initiatives specifically targeted at addressing this issue, with medical officers working in rural hospitals having no specific vocational training or registration until as recently as earlier this year.

Fortunately, there have now been some more significant developments to address the rural workforce problem. The Medical Council has recently formed a Branch Advisory Body for Rural Hospital Generalists. The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners have formed a Rural Faculty of College with a Division of Rural Hospital Medicine. These are very important developments for rural secondary care services and will hopefully result in improved retention and recruitment of rural hospital generalists.

In addition, both the Auckland and Otago medical programmes now incorporate elective regional-rural immersion programmes into their curricula. The educational focus of these programmes differs from vertical silo learning in specialty topics seen in urban centres to parallel learning which may vary from topic to topic in the same day. A student may attend a patient with chest pain in the morning, a patient from a motor vehicle accident in the afternoon and attend a birth in the evening.

Under Dr Farry's direction, Otago launched its rural immersion programme in 2007. Rachel Lynskey gives her reflections on her experiences as part of the initial cohort of students on page 12. Further to this, other novel opportunities for students to experience brief encounters with rural communities are also appearing. Michael Lee describes on page 16 how he and his research group travelled to the remote community of Kohukohu in the Hokianga region as part of a summer studentship in Auckland. He investigated the usefulness of natriuretic peptide biomarkers in detecting left ventricular hypertrophy in patients with type II diabetes. We offer special thanks to Associate Professor Warwick Bagg and Dr Farry for providing us with informative descriptions of the Otago and Auckland rural programmes respectively, which have been published accompanying Rachel and Michael's articles.

We extend our sincere thanks Dr John Adams, Dean of the Dunedin School of Medicine, for his generous sponsorship of this issue's Dean's Writing Prize. Aaron Ooi, a third year medical student at the Auckland School of Medicine was the worthy recipient of this prize for his piece on Alzheimers disease. Son T Pham received the runner-up prize for his work on signalling in rat cochlea. Congratulations are also due to Rachel Lynskey of the Christchurch School of Medicine who received our Features prize for this issue. We wish to thank our two academic advisors, Associate Professor David Perez and Dr John Alison as well as our expert reviewers from across New Zealand for their ongoing valued contribution.

We hope that you find the content of this edition of the journal to be an informative account of some of the key issues facing the future of medical practice in New Zealand and abroad.

The NZMSJ Executive

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