

# » HealthX: proudly celebrating student research

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» Joseph was HealthX Co-Chair in 2017–2018 and thoroughly enjoyed his experiences in organising HealthX. In his spare time, he is a postgraduate research student in the field of neuropsychopharmacology.

print materials; meeting sponsor requirements; managing judging app systems; organising catering; and abiding by health and safety regulations. Completing these tasks involve 20 HealthX executive board members, three subcommittees spanning a further 30 student volunteers, 20 student judges (at PhD level), over 50 staff judges, and several 'super judges' – who preside over the judging process across the entire day in order to maintain consistency and ultimately determine the final prize winners. This conference is overall headed by two staggered co-chairs in order to ease the transition process for the future HealthX organisation (e.g. one co-chair serves in 2017 and 2018, a second in 2018 and 2019, a third in 2019 and 2020, and so on). Furthermore, past co-chairs are invited back to the HealthX Board as advisors, and the staff mentors present on the Board have often been HealthX alumni, contributing to the legacy of this event. Institutionally, HealthX is heavily supported by the FMHS through the Associate Dean of Postgraduate Studies.

## Introduction



Figure 1: Welcome to HealthX 2018

The Health Exposition (HealthX) Conference has been the flagship student-led conference for student researchers of the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (FMHS) at the University of Auckland since 2007.<sup>1</sup> All FMHS research students (i.e. summer research scholarship, honours, masters, and doctoral) are invited to partake in this one-day conference, typically held on a Friday in early September. Entertable categories include the traditional poster and 10 minute oral presentations (with a question and answer session),

as well as an expeditious 3 minute elevator pitch. Aside from the \$15,000 NZD worth of monetary prizes and travel grants made available by generous sponsors and supporters (in 2018), the competitive nature of this conference lends itself to augment one's curriculum vitae. The scale of this event has grown impressively since its inception to encompass over 100 student presenters in 2018: 64 oral; 12 elevator pitch; and 40 poster presenters.

Inevitably, the organisation of such a large event presents a host of tasks, such as: applying for funding for conference expenditures; producing marketing materials; proof-reading over 100 abstract submissions; allocating presentation types to each presenter; assigning at least three staff or student judges to each presentation; publishing

However, of utmost importance is the ethos behind HealthX, which is constituted by three broad underlying themes: mastering the art of science communication; networking with the wider research community; and developing student academic enquiry.

## Mastering the art of science communication

Given the diverse nature of research at the FMHS, from molecular biology through to population-wide epidemiological studies, HealthX places emphasis on the ability to disseminate complex research concepts to general audiences. To aid student preparation, HealthX organises an annual presentation skills workshop discussing vital tips for successful presentations through rigorous preparation methods, effective body language, verbal modulations, aesthetic considerations in visual media, and practical poster-printing tips. HealthX provides an important staging ground for young and early career researchers to confidently prepare their presentations amongst their peers prior to presenting at larger international conferences, where the perceived stakes may be higher.

In the context of New Zealand, this prized skill also underlines the crucial role that researchers of a publicly funded tertiary institution act in as "the critic and conscience of society" in accordance with the Education Act.<sup>2</sup> The ability to reconfigure complex concepts to

maintain accessibility to audiences of different levels allows for more effective communication with the general public. This is particularly important in research areas with greater ethical challenges that require more stakeholder discussion (e.g. experimentation using aborted embryos, growing miniature human brains from induced pluripotent stem cells, gene editing of embryos). Thus, HealtheX provides an important opportunity for the professional development of vital scientific communication skills.

### Networking with the wider research community

The FMHS itself harbours an impressive breadth and quality of research. Simply knowing about other research conducted within the same institution paves a convenient path to collaboration. For example, many biomedical research groups integrate clinical research, given the close physical proximity of the FMHS to Auckland City Hospital. While intra-institutional seminars, mailing lists, and research group websites allow for effective internal bridging between research groups, HealtheX represents the largest cross-section of active research undertaken at the FMHS. In order to aid this networking process, HealtheX stratifies its oral presentation sessions by research methods. This allows students and staff to understand how their research modality can be applied to other disciplines, thereby encouraging networking and collaboration.

### Developing student academic enquiry

HealtheX provides a momentous platform to introduce young potential researchers to the diverse world of research and academic enquiry. By involving students in every stage of organising and participating in this conference, it acts to inspire a new generation of academics and also highlights the importance of research.

In the context of New Zealand, a relatively small country, importing international research to inform best clinical practice is common – often due to the lack of domestic research. However, this procedure may prevent effective treatment of indigenous and minority groups, given their inevitable under-representation in the source research populations. As such, best clinical practice guidelines may not translate directly from overseas to New Zealand due to genetic or cultural variability – an example of which is the treatment and diagnosis of obesity, due to underlying genetic and dietary differences in populations.<sup>3,4</sup> Consequently, using international research to inform best clinical practice could exacerbate health inequities in Māori and Pacific Island populations in direct contradiction to te Tiriti o Waitangi.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, conducting research in New Zealand through the principles of kaupapa Māori is crucial in applying research findings to improve the health of all New Zealanders equitably.<sup>6</sup> As such, HealtheX provides a formative platform to inspire the importance of research in the context of New Zealand.

### Conclusion

Having celebrated 12 years of student research, HealtheX has firmly embedded itself in the culture of the FMHS. Its competitive nature and monetary prizes have nurtured an atmosphere inspiring improved science communication, and have created novel travel opportunities for students to attend external conferences or international collaborators' laboratories. Furthermore, the scale of this event has played a major role in encouraging collaboration and has introduced the expansiveness of research at this tertiary institution to young researchers. Through extensive student recruitment, staff mentorship,

and institutional support, HealtheX is able to improve year on year to hold itself to ever higher standards.



Figure 2: HealtheX 2018 winners. Back row (left to right): Sam Blanchett, Farha Ramzan, Jason Yeung, Micah Daniel Austria, Luis Knight, Sarah Maessen. Front row (left to right): Joyce Mathan, Daniel Ho, Hannah Ng, Yukti Vyas, Grace Borichevsky, Rebecca Griffith.

### References

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