

Supporting Otago: clear vision behind new ophthalmology scholarship



Dr Stella Cullington and Dr Ben O'Keeffe (all photos by Sharron Bennett).

Dr Ben O'Keeffe says receiving the inaugural Dr Stella Cullington Postgraduate Scholarship in Ophthalmology is a welcome acknowledgement of his efforts in an increasingly important research area.

Dr O'Keeffe, a 2012 Otago Medical School graduate, received the award at a ceremony at the University of Otago Staff Club in December.

“Being the inaugural scholarship recipient was a real privilege. There are only a small number of researchers working in this area nationally so it's great to have support for my project, and recognition of the worth of my work in this area.”

More ophthalmology-related research will be needed in future as New Zealand's population ages, he says.

His current project examines the effects of raised intraocular pressure (IOP) following cataract surgery on the structure of the optic nerve.

Recent studies have shown acute IOP elevation leads to changes in the optic nerve's parameters.

“These changes may reflect underlying biomechanical characteristics, which may differ between normal and glaucomatous eyes. I'd like to investigate whether the IOP elevation in the 24-hours after cataract surgery leads to similar results,” he says.

Dr O'Keeffe describes his undergraduate experiences at the Otago Medical School as “amazing.”

“It's an important time in your life, and it can be quite challenging, but Otago's supportive environment made it really rewarding – I really enjoyed studying in Dunedin, and being on placement in Wellington for my last year.”

In his second year at Otago he also transitioned from playing rugby to refereeing, and is now in his second year as a Super Rugby referee.

He hopes to submit his Master of Ophthalmology thesis in 2017 and plans to gain an ophthalmology PhD, and undertake specialist eye-treatment training, in the next four years.



Associate Professor Gordon Sanderson congratulates Dr O'Keeffe

Dr Cullington says she was motivated to establish the scholarship, in conjunction with the Dunedin School of Medicine's Ophthalmology unit and Otago's Development and Alumni Relations Office, because research into treating eye conditions "addressed a real need."

Recent advances in treatment have shown research can produce results, and have dramatically reduced inevitable blindness in many cases, she says.

"As someone with macular degeneration I thought about what I could do to help. Some health areas like cancer research receive a lot of money, which is good, but there are also very deserving causes that need all the help they can get because they relate to common problems which affect the lives of so many people – ophthalmology is one such area."

Dr Cullington graduated MB ChB in Edinburgh in 1963 and first came to New Zealand in 1965. She spent most of her life as a GP in Northern Ireland, apart from four years in Dunedin in the 1970s, during which her husband Donald was organist and choirmaster at St Paul's Cathedral.

They finally retired to Dunedin 13 years ago and have a daughter here, Dr Fiona Pickering, who works as a GP for Otago's Student Health Services; her son-in-law is Division of Health Sciences Associate Professor Neil Pickering.

She was very excited to meet Ben.

"I was delighted to meet such an excellent candidate for the first award of the Scholarship. Not only did he have the most impressive CV, but his interests exactly coincided with my hopes regarding research in the relevant fields in Ophthalmology. He has a most attractive personality and good communication skills – I look forward to the results of his research and wish him a very successful career".