

# MOMENTUM

Progress through research | MARCH 2026 UPDATE

At the Auckland Medical Research Foundation, your support enables researchers to focus on what truly matters: tackling the complex health issues that deliver solutions to improve the quality of people's lives.

100%  
of your donation  
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Medical Research

## Re-writing the future for at-risk babies

**DR ISAAC BERNHARDT**, a Clinical Geneticist, is driven by one clear goal: to stop children from being harmed by a disease that can be prevented if found early. In his clinical work, Isaac cares for babies and young children with a rare inherited condition that can cause severe brain damage or, in some cases, early death.

Short-chain enoyl-CoA hydratase (SCEH) deficiency is an inborn error of metabolism that is not currently screened for in newborn babies. Research shows that this condition occurs more frequently in Māori and Pacific families, highlighting an important health equity issue.

One of the challenges is that babies with SCEH deficiency usually

appear healthy at birth. By the time symptoms appear months or years later, permanent damage has already occurred. Isaac's research is exploring whether this condition could be detected as part of routine newborn screening so treatment can begin before harm is done.

By studying affected children and assessing practical ways to identify the condition early, Isaac's work earned an AMRF Douglas Goodfellow Medical Research Fellowship and has the potential to prevent serious long-term disability or loss of life. It also addresses a long-standing inequity by ensuring that our health system in Aotearoa New Zealand better reflects the needs of Māori and Pacific communities.



**“If we can find this condition early, we can change a child's entire lifetime.”**

**Dr Isaac Bernhardt**



**Auckland  
Medical Research  
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### Inside this issue

Transforming IBS care  
The latest statistics on our Research Fund  
Turning tax time into progress  
Vale Suzanne (Suzie) Taylor

# Transforming IBS care: supporting better gut health and mental wellbeing

For Dr Nicola Gillies, improving health means taking a whole-person approach. Her research focuses on people living with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) – a common and often debilitating condition that affects daily life, work, relationships and overall wellbeing.



“People don’t experience gut health and mental health separately and our health care shouldn’t either.”

Dr Nicola Gillies

**MANY PEOPLE LIVING** with IBS also experience anxiety or depression, yet treatments often address the gut and the mind separately.

Nicola is leading a nationwide study exploring whether a more supportive and flexible eating pattern can improve both digestive symptoms and mental wellbeing at the same time.

Rather than relying on highly restrictive diets – that can be stressful or unsafe for some people – her approach is guided by experienced dietitians and emphasises balance,

enjoyment, and habits that are realistic over the long term.

Equity is a central consideration in this work. Māori health researchers and community partners are actively involved in shaping the study, helping to ensure cultural safety, meaningful participation, and outcomes that are relevant for whānau across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Supported by your donations, this project grant has the potential to reshape how IBS is treated and offer people practical, holistic support that fits into their everyday lives.

**This research is only progressed by people like you. When you join with us on our mission, you’re supporting real-life impact – helping to strengthen health outcomes for us all.**

# The latest statistics on our research future

It's with great excitement we share news on the greatest gift we could have asked for last year – we made it to 33% of our target for the Futures Fellowship Fund. You helped us raise over \$1 million in 2025, bringing our total to \$2.35 million.

**AND MOMENTUM MATTERS.** This year we ask you to reach further with us and help us find the remaining \$3.65 million needed to reach our goal.

Why? The Futures Fellowship Fund will be critical in sustaining a vital group of researchers, a cohort often described as early or mid-career researchers. These are our scientists who will lead the next generation of medical discovery.

Yet many move from one short-term contract to another, compete for funding against senior, permanently employed researchers; and must secure new funding every one to two years just to remain in research at all.

**You've heard from us in the past why this funding is so urgently needed but ongoing studies continue to reinforce just how critical this is, with alarming statistics like this:**

- When students complete their studies, they often face the stark reality of a limited post-doctoral pipeline or other university-supported career pathways, leaving them with little choice but to leave the university sector or move abroad. About half of the domestic PhD graduates (40-50%) and 80% of international PhD graduates have left Aotearoa New Zealand five years after graduation.<sup>1</sup> This loss of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) talent occurs despite the majority of ECRs (73-90%) expressing a strong desire to remain in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>
- 41% of respondents reported they did not feel confident that they would continue to work in the Science, Innovation & Technology system over the next 5 years. The potential for 'brain drain' is real—if ECRs were not employed in their current role, one-fifth of respondents reported they would seek employment overseas.<sup>3</sup>

**And then there's this personal reflection from Dr Haruna Suzuki-Kerr, a research fellow who was enabled by your donations and our funding to sustain her research.**

"A PhD qualifies you to be an independent scientist, but this comes with a catch: in many University sectors, you need to secure your own research funding. 'Having a job' at the University or a research institution is generally dependent on the funding, and each position is usually only available for 1-3 years.

"This is often called 'survival' because you are constantly looking for the food (i.e. next funding) simply to continue your (research) life while balancing everything else. In my 'survival', I submitted over 60 funding applications to transition from a part-time to a full-time position at the University, with tremendous support from my mentors in strategising and developing resilience.

"The recent tightening of the science budget makes the tough 'survival' of emerging researchers even tougher, from what has already been pointed out by many.<sup>4</sup>

"A number of NZ-grown researchers with genuine passion and talent for science have left academic research due to the lack of funding. On an individual basis, it's one person's dream job gone. But for New Zealand, we have lost NZ-grown researchers, who were or will be the supervisors and mentors for the next generation of scientists."

1. Education Counts, The Mobility Patterns of New Zealand's Doctoral Graduates (2024), accessed 20 February 2026, [https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/251238/The-mobility-patterns-of-New-Zealand-s-doctoral-graduates.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/251238/The-mobility-patterns-of-New-Zealand-s-doctoral-graduates.pdf)  
 2. Early Career Voices from a Changing Research System, NZ Science Review Vol 80 2025  
 3. Pressures and Pathways: Early Career Experiences in Aotearoa NZ's Public Research Organisations, NZ Science Review Vol 80 2025  
 4. Devolution of New Zealand Research to a Gig Economy: time for investment, NZ Science Review Vol 79 (1-2) 2024

# Celebrating 70 years of progress

In 2025, we marked a defining milestone: seventy years of empowering researchers and transforming lives. We honoured our founders, recognised decades of scientific discovery, and acknowledged the life changing impact made possible by the generosity of you, our donors.



Dr Haruna Suzuki-Kerr

Donate  
today

We launched our Futures Fellowship Fund to stop our mid-career researchers becoming just another statistic. So please come with us on our fund-finding mission and ensure our talent isn't lost, potential is not wasted and the future of medical research remains strong, right here at home.

Donate securely online at [www.medicalresearch.org.nz](http://www.medicalresearch.org.nz) or call us on 09 923-1701 to chat about ways to give

Our 70-year legacy has also inspired a brand refresh to carry us confidently, with momentum, into the future.

## To honour this milestone, we hosted a four-part 70th Anniversary Speaker Series, spanning cancer epidemiology, neonatal care, respiratory medicine, neuroscience and biotechnology – showcasing the calibre of research you make possible.

**FOR THOSE** who enjoy snippets of facts and information, the following is an outtake from our presenters, with all the sessions recorded and available to watch at your leisure on our YouTube channel:

**Dr Richard Frith**, the New Zealand-based innovator of the CPAP breathing machine said this of his work in the early 1980s: *“I don’t think there’s any doubt that the patients we treated would have died in very short order.”* In Richard’s original study, 32 patients were investigated and the ‘suspicion’ that some serious illnesses were caused by disordered sleep was confirmed. The most important problem revealed by the study was obstructive sleep apnoea which, not only prevented normal sleep, but placed significant strain on the heart and circulation, consequently causing heart failure. On the very first night trialling CPAP, the patient slept for the first time, was able to stay awake the next day and the signs of severe heart failure rapidly disappeared. *“That was the key – we could reverse the heart failure in these severely ill people, and it would be gone permanently”.*

**Distinguished Professor Dame Jane Harding**, introduced a simple sugar gel treatment for newborn babies with low-blood sugar into clinical practice, told audiences: *“It usually takes at least 20 years to get something into [clinical] practice so, by comparison, this is miraculously fast and it’s changed lives of millions of babies and families around the world because of a little clinical trial we did here.”* This home-grown innovation is now an internationally recommended first-line treatment for newborn low blood sugar, preventing potential brain damage, in many countries around the world.

**Associate Professor Gary Cheung** clearly captured why end-of-life care and assisted dying cannot be reduced to simple checklists, reflecting both his professional clinical insight and deep ethical awareness. *“There’s no blood test for suffering. It’s a complex construct – it’s physical suffering but it’s also psychological suffering, existential suffering.”*

Thanks to the Ted & Mollie Carr Medical Travel Fund, we were also able to bring home two internationally acclaimed NZ trained scientists:

**Professor Donna Rose Addis** is the world’s first Samoan neuroscientist, born in New Zealand, and now making strides in Canada as an academic scientist. She spoke about why the human capacity to imagine the future is not a luxury, but a fundamental part of how we cope, plan, and thrive. *“If we spend half of our waking lives [imagining the past and the future], it must serve some adaptive function. It allows us to troubleshoot and problem-solve in advance, to allow us to adapt our behaviours and make good decisions, increasing our coping and reduce our worrying about upcoming events.”*

**Professor Robert Gourdie**, now working in the USA, shared his exciting work tying New Zealand milk products (milk exosomes) to health and medical research. Naturally designed to be ingested and to pass biological information from mother to baby, milk exosomes are one of the few exosome types that can be taken orally and remain bioavailable in the body. Their scale is equally striking. *“Around  $10^{12}$  to  $10^{13}$  exosomes per millilitre,”* Professor Gourdie explained, amounting to *“roughly a quadrillion exosomes in a single litre of milk.”*

Using them as drug delivery vehicles for treatable diseases and disorders will have significant health impacts for many years to come.

Collectively, these events brought hundreds of you, our supporters, into meaningful conversation with researchers working across the spectrum of human health.

We were so encouraged by the feedback and for the inspiration provided by our speakers – feedback like: *“I found the session really informative, and I particularly enjoyed Dr Frith’s presentation on sleep apnoea – I found it really easy to follow and it was possibly a push for me to get help for a member of my family.”*

Our 70th anniversary also celebrated the strength of our partnerships. Long standing collaborations with the University of Auckland, Shaw and Partners, and BlueStar, and an emerging partnership with the Auckland University of Technology, remind us that progress is always a collective.

With new health challenges emerging and demand for research funding growing, our role in the research ecosystem is even more important than ever. As we look ahead, we do so with immense gratitude for everyone who has been part of our mission and with great optimism that, together, we will continue to empower researchers and transform lives for many generations to come.

**Missed the 70th Speaker Series?** You can watch it anytime – search AMRF on YouTube or search ‘video’ at [www.medicalresearch.org.nz](http://www.medicalresearch.org.nz)



## Vale Suzanne (Suzie) Taylor

**AS WE LOOK BACK** on the past year, we carry with us the memory of our treasured friend and colleague, Suzanne Taylor. Suzie passed away suddenly on 4 December 2025, leaving a huge gap in our small AMRF team that is felt every day.

For eight years, Suzie was at the centre of AMRF's finances. In this small organisation where every relationship matters, she brought a special blend of financial expertise, warmth, and genuine connection. Many of you will remember her as "Suzie T" and as the bright, bubbly presence who greeted donors, researchers, and volunteers all with the same sincerity.

Her role extended far beyond finance. Suzie was an integral part of our team, building close relationships with donors and supporters and trust with research institutions. She ensured that the financial prudence - for which our Foundation is known - was rigorously maintained across all aspects of our operations.

We remain grateful for the legacy Suzie leaves: her integrity, kindness, and a belief in the power of medical research to change lives. Suzie will forever be part of the AMRF story.

## Turning tax time into progress

**AS THE END** of the financial year approaches, many of us start thinking about how we can use what we have in ways that truly matter and to make a positive difference. Tax time is your opportunity to do both.

We exist to support medical and health researchers who are working to progress health outcomes for our communities. Through researcher-led, peer-reviewed funding, we back clinicians, scientists, and population health experts. These are the people with the experience, insight, and determination to identify our health challenges and turn ideas into real-world solutions.

As a registered New Zealand charity (CC# 22674), donations to us are eligible for a donation tax credit. This means that when you lodge your tax return, you can claim back a portion of your gift and know your donation is making a real difference in the lives of others.

Your donation made before the end of the financial year is an investment in people – in their progress, leadership, and dedication to better health. Gifts of any size help strengthen the capacity of our researchers in Auckland and Northland to advance prevention, diagnosis, and treatment close to home.

### Your generosity empowers researchers to lead progress where it's needed most.



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**Getting in touch**

Call us at 09 923-1701

Email [amrf@medicalresearch.org.nz](mailto:amrf@medicalresearch.org.nz)

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