

News Release



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Childhood asthma and allergy researcher awarded HRC's prestigious Liley Medal

The Health Research Council of New Zealand's (HRC) Liley Medal for health research has been awarded to Professor Innes Asher from The University of Auckland for her research into the prevalence of asthma and allergies in children worldwide.

The Liley Medal, awarded annually by the HRC, recognises an individual who has published a research study that has made an outstanding contribution to health and medical sciences.

Professor Asher leads the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC), a major worldwide research programme, with key coordination from New Zealand, studying asthma, allergic rhinoconjunctivitis and atopic eczema.

Her research studied almost half a million school children in 56 countries to determine whether the prevalence of asthma, rhinitis and eczema had changed. Previously, the prevalence of these conditions had been increasing; however, the research she led found decreases in prevalence in many study centres, including New Zealand. Increases in prevalence were more common in centres with low prevalence and developing countries.

"The most concerning finding was that the increasing prevalence was most common in the most populous regions of the world (Latin America, Africa, India, Asia-Pacific) meaning high health care impact," Professor Asher says.

Level 3, 110 Stanley Street, Auckland PO Box 5541, Wellesley Street, Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 303 5200 Facsimile 64 9 377 9988 Website www.hrc.govt.nz

In addition to providing new evidence that environmental factors determine prevalence of asthma and allergies, the study has produced an effective research model which can monitor public health internationally and engage researchers worldwide.

“This research is an inspiring example of global leadership and successful international collaboration,” HRC Chief Executive Dr Robin Olds says.

Professor Asher’s research was published in the prestigious international journal, *The Lancet*, in 2006.

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For further information:

Dr Robin Olds
HRC Chief Executive

OR

Rosie Cotter
HRC Communications Coordinator

Tel: 09 303 5204
rolds@hrc.govt.nz

Tel: 09 303 5220
rcotter@hrc.govt.nz

About the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC)

The HRC is the Crown agency responsible for the management of the Government’s investment in public good health research. Ownership of the HRC resides with the Minister of Health, with funding being primarily provided from Vote Research, Science and Technology. A Memorandum of Understanding between the two Ministers sets out this relationship.

Established under the Health Research Council Act 1990, the HRC's statutory functions include:

- advising the Minister and administering funds in relation to national health research policy
- fostering the recruitment, education, training, and retention of those engaged in health research in New Zealand
- initiating and supporting health research

- undertaking consultation to establish priorities in health research
- promoting and disseminating the results of health research to encourage their contribution to health science, policy and delivery
- ensuring the development and application of appropriate assessment standards by committees or subcommittees that assess health research proposals.

About Sir William Liley

Sir William Liley KCMG, BMedSc, MB, ChB, PhD (ANU), Hon. DSc (VUW), Dip Obs, FRSNZ, FRCOG, Hon. FACOG (1929 – 1983)

Although it is more than 20 years since his passing Sir William Liley's contribution to medical science, particularly in the area of obstetrics, is still celebrated.

Born in Auckland in 1929 Albert William Liley – who always preferred to be known as Bill – was educated at Royal Oak Primary School before moving on to Auckland Grammar where his intellectual capacity began to blossom.

Awarded a University National Scholarship in 1947 Bill Liley distinguished himself at both Auckland and Otago Universities. He was gold medallist in anatomy in 1950, secured a Senior Scholarship in medicine and was awarded the Travelling Scholarship in medicine in 1954.

Instead of taking up the scholarship he headed for the Australian National University where he took up a research scholarship in physiology, working on various aspects of synaptic transmission. Despite being a recently qualified medical graduate he had four papers published in the Journal of Physiology.

Bill Liley returned to Auckland as a Sandoz Research Fellow and in 1958 was awarded a Research fellowship in obstetrics by the Medical Research Council of New Zealand, the HRC's predecessor. From that time until his premature death in 1983 he held a series of appointments with the MRC, including being a council member between 1972 and 1978 and Chairman of the South Pacific Health Committee between 1973 and 1978.

In 1968 Bill Liley was appointed to a personal Chair in Perinatal Physiology at the University of Auckland's Postgraduate School of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. He was particularly attracted to the problems of unborn and newly born children and his major focus became Rh haemolytic disease of the newborn – a major issue in obstetrics. At the time he entered the field perinatal mortality was about 25 per cent.

One of his great contributions lay in extending the use of spectrophotometry of amniotic fluid to a much wider range of potentially affected pregnancies – work that gained him an international reputation. The technique he developed made it

possible to identify which baby could be retained safely in utero for a normal gestation period and which should be delivered. As a result perinatal mortality from haemolytic disease at National Women's Hospital fell to 8 per cent.

A CMG in 1967 and was followed in 1973 by a knighthood (KCMG). Sir William's work was also internationally recognised by a variety of organisations. He served as a member of the WHO Expert Advisory Panel on maternal and child health from 1968 until his death. He was an Honorary fellow of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and was appointed a member of the International Association for Advice and Research on Mental Deficiency. He also held several other honorary fellowships and memberships of prestigious societies overseas.

An extended biography prepared by Sir John Scott sums up his life in this way:

“Sir William Liley embodied many characteristics which have typified the leaders and giants of scientific endeavour in New Zealand. He combined top-flight intellectual ability with practical skills, humanity and humility. His accomplishments indicated to his generation and those coming after that achievement on a world scale was very much within the grasp of dedicated scientists who chose to return or remain in New Zealand.”