

New research centre in Christchurch

Diabetes research in Christchurch has been consolidated in a centre-city hub.

The Diabetes Research Institute (DRI) building in Christchurch is a new centre of excellence for studying the treatment, prevention and causes of diabetes in New Zealand.

At 40 Stewart Street, the DRI is housed within a dedicated health research building (the Medical Research Precinct) adjacent to the Diabetes Centre, a unit of expertise in clinical care for those with diabetes, and the Christchurch Hospital and School of Medicine.

The Diabetes Research Institute Trust was launched in November 2008 to find new premises for the Lipid and Diabetes Research Group, formed in 1985 by the late Sir Don Beaven – tragically killed in a fire at Little Akaloa last November – who set up Christchurch's first diabetes clinical and research unit in the 1960s.

The Research Group had been housed in the Hagley Hostel building which is being demolished as part of Christchurch Hospital's \$400 million revamp.

The group's director Professor Russell Scott says they had the choice of abandoning all clinical research, or relocating. He said that New Zealand has been active in diabetes research and clinical care for more than 40 years, but research programmes have been hampered by a lack of facilities and funding.

He and others decided to establish the trust, and found investors willing to support the building of a three-storied medical research precinct. The first objective of the trust has been raising the \$4.3m required to buy and fit out the building; its second will be to create a capital fund specifically to promote diabetes research, investigate new treatments and train new researchers.

Trustees are Professor Scott and a number of businessmen: Lew McIvor, a trustee of the Bone Marrow Cancer Trust; Hamish Doig, chairman of the fund raising committee responsible for raising \$6.8m for the Bone Marrow Cancer Trust completed in 2008; and John Arbuckle of the Payless retail chain.

Professor Scott and other DRI researchers now occupy the top floor. He says visits to the Melbourne-based Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute helped in developing a purpose-built layout.

The other floors will be used for health research and clinical care of complementary medical conditions such as brain and nerve disorders, infections, and heart and vessel disease, all conditions related to diabetes.

Professor Scott considers New Zealand has done tolerably well in diabetes research, but research has been fragmented and geographically dispersed. "Dunedin's is much more nutrition-based, our strength is with clinical studies, and Auckland is involved more with basic science."

Christchurch-based diabetes research has a budget of \$1.25m a year, \$1m of which comes from offshore. "We haven't until now had the geographic infrastructure to expand diabetes research in Christchurch, but with this new purpose built facility, we anticipate an expanded portfolio of research initiatives that focus on problems relevant to New Zealand."

Professor Scott sees an opportunity for the DRI to collaborate, not only with the diabetes research centres in Dunedin and Auckland, but also with researchers from countries such as Singapore and China. "Up until now we have had to say 'sorry, we haven't anywhere to put you' and have been unable to enjoy the benefits of overseas visiting scientists and clinicians."

The Research precinct will also contain a clinical trial unit for the first stage of drug testing on humans. It will be a 12-bed unit with intensive-care type facilities.

Mr Arbuckle says naming rights to the precinct could be negotiated with any corporate or individual prepared to make the capital available or make a commitment to on-going operational funding. He cited the AMI Stadium, previously Jade Stadium, as an example of the kind of sponsorship agreement which the trust would consider.

As well as seeking funding support from agencies and foundations, the trust has a website 'www.diabetesresearchinstitutetrust.co.nz' which provides details on how the public can help. Donations of \$50 to the Diabetes Research Institute Trust can be made by phoning 0900diabetes (34223). ●

