What a year it has been for Professor Alison Jones (Education), who received one of eight 2012 University of Auckland Teaching Excellence Awards (for Excellence in Postgraduate Research Supervision).

The wonderful book she co-authored with Kuni Jenkins - Words Between Us: First Māori-Pākehā conversations on paper - has won prizes in the Massey University 2012 Māori Book Awards, the PANZ Book Design Award and the Pearson Award for Best Educational Book for 2012. And she was a finalist in Next magazine’s Woman of the Year in Education.

Alison Jones, an internationally acclaimed professor in Te Puna Wānanga, the School of Māori Education, confesses that supervising masters and doctoral research keeps her on her intellectual toes.

“Supervising postgraduate research keeps me energised and in contact with new and emerging researchers,” she says. “I get leverage off my tendency to be rather forthright. I scare some students and stimulate others, and I work well with the stimulated ones. So I have to give the credit [for the Teaching Excellence Award] to my courageous students.”

One of Alison’s many doctoral candidates, Marek Tesar, is on the cusp of completing his three-year research project investigating the construction of childhoods through children’s literature and has recently been awarded a prestigious scholarship from the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia. He credits his success to Alison’s unrelenting and responsive supervision.

“What Alison as my supervisor, my doctoral studies are never boring,” he says. “They are always full of fun and adventures, always full of surprises. Alison’s advice, care and rigour are complemented by her honest, sincere, tough but very caring and responsive supervision. Without Alison, I would not have trusted myself to think that the story of my thesis was valuable to read and write, nor would I be planning to submit my thesis in the next few months, on time.”

Alison particularly enjoys working with Māori research students and colleagues who, she says, lead the way with creative and intelligent thinking about possible educational futures for New Zealand. She provides regular workshops at universities and wānanga throughout New Zealand to support postgraduate students and academics, and estimates she has provided academic support and guidance for more than 250 Māori doctoral and masters students.

As a self-confessed intellectual grasshopper, Alison is internationally acclaimed for her initiation and leadership of pioneering areas of educational research.

As the first education researcher to be awarded two prestigious Marsden grants, Alison has opened new and important areas of inquiry. Her research on anxiety about children’s bodies contributed to changes in policy on touching children in New Zealand schools and her latest research focuses on good Māori and Pākehā educational relationships.

Kate Backler

Photo: Alison Jones (left) with masters student Rewa Paewai.
University buildings win awards

Three recent University of Auckland building projects were honoured by the NZ Architects Institute (NZAI) on 10 October, each earning a Local Architecture Awards, designed to recognise quality architecture at a community level.

Architectural open heart surgery

The new Boyle Building, the atrium (see below) and the newly refurbished building at Grafton Campus, designed by Jasmax Ltd and receiving an award in the category of “Education”, was described by the judges as “the architectural equivalent of open-heart surgery [with] vertical and silo-stacked teaching spaces … unclogged to provide horizontal and transparent modern educational learning environments. A new atrium, in which a green snake of a staircase serves as a unifying physical and visual thread, creates an organisational axis for the Medical [and Health Sciences] campus. The new architecture has been successfully integrated with 1970s Brutalist buildings to revivify an important academic institution. The architects’ thoroughgoing commitment to sustainable design is evident in the building’s planning …”

Campus by the sea

Designed by Cheshire Architects Ltd and also winning its award in the category of “Education”, the Leigh Marine Centre (centre left) was described by the judges as “a research facility ideally suited to its place and purpose. Three buildings of robust, simple materials provide study spaces and accommodation screened against the maritime climate. The architecture encourages collegiality and provides marine biologists with an inspiring working and learning environment. Surely it will also provide happy memories of days spent studying in this campus by the sea.”

Light-filled haven

The School of Music building (top left) designed by Hill Manning Mitchell Architects, which won its award in the category of “Enduring Architecture”, was described by the judges as “a courtyard building which, in lieu of a local tradition of cloistered typologies, looks to and reinterprets the Oxbridge quadrangle, remains a secure and light-filled haven for students and their teachers. “In it, the caged birds still sing: the building has been largely untouched since the day it was completed, and continues to provide a simulating learning environment. A fascinating sequence of spaces leads users and visitors to the building’s tailored study and performance rooms, and to carefully designed communal spaces that offer opportunities for informal encounters. The building has been much loved by generations of music students.”

Fireworks

The Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and The University of Auckland’s Dance Studies Programme have collaborated to create an evening of dance and music, to be presented at 7pm on 31 October at the TelstraClear Pacific Events Centre in Manukau.

The performance features the APO, University Dance Studies students, and approximately 100 students from Wiri Central School, Pakuranga Intermediate School, and Tangaroa College. Together they perform a new contemporary work set to Handel’s Music for the Royal Fireworks, created by renowned New Zealand choreographer and Atamira Dance Company Artistic Director, Moss Patterson.

Fireworks also features performances by Dance Studies students of works created during the year. Highlights includes works premiered at the 2012 International Youth Dance Festival, Singapore, and the 2012 International Festival of Academies, Taipei.

For more information and bookings see www.apo.co.nz or www.pacific.org.nz, phone 9 623 1052.

Students from Dance Studies and Tangaroa College rehearse.

Image: Rimoni Photography
Friends lead the way

Every spring at Graduation Week, the great marquee rises over the long lawn beside Old Government House.

This October, illuminated with hundreds of tiny blue and white lights, it also became the venue for a special dinner for 300 guests hosted by the Chancellor Roger France.

The annual Chancellor’s Dinner is held to recognise and thank those donors who have given substantial gifts to the University over the previous 12 months. This year, however, there was an additional reason to celebrate: the final total of the “Leading the Way” campaign – $202.9 million gifted to the University and foundations that support it by 3000 donors. This sum, more than twice the original target of $100 million set in 2006, makes it one of the most ambitious and successful philanthropic campaigns undertaken in New Zealand. In thanking all donors, Vice-Chancellor Professor Stuart McCutcheon underlined the significance of the achievement.

“You have changed the face of philanthropy in New Zealand. You have told the community that you believe this institution is something special, something worthy of your investment. But most of all, you have made it possible for our extraordinary people to do extraordinary things; and there is no greater gift that you can give a University like ours.”

Chancellor Roger France spoke of the importance of having a university that is internationally competitive and of the desire to contribute nationally, which was at the heart of the “Leading the Way” campaign.

“A continuously well-educated and well-trained population is essential for our social and economic well-being. Education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and competences needed to participate effectively in society and in the economy. It also contributes to the expansion of scientific and cultural knowledge. This was the background against which the University’s campaign was set.”

Each year the Chancellor also inducts new members into one of three societies in the Chancellor’s Circle, in recognition of their sustained support of the University. The new members of the Sir Maurice O’Rorke Society, with total contributions of more than $5 million, were Cure Kids, which has funded more than 40 child health-focused research projects at the University and the Cure Kids Chair in Child Research; and the Freemasons, who established the Freemasons Chair in Geriatric Medicine in 1986 and continue to partner with the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences to address the health concerns of the elderly.

Five new members were inducted into the Sir George Fowlds Society – Buckley Systems, the Glavish Family Trust, Fisher & Paykel Appliances, The Kellihier Charitable Trust and the New Zealand Leadership Institute. They have made total contributions of between $1 million and $5 million.


New Royal Fellow

Professor Reinhard Klette (Computer Science) has been announced as one of 11 new fellows in the Royal Society of New Zealand. The Society described Reinhard as “a world leader in computer vision who, with his students, has improved the performance of computer vision algorithms by newly-designed ways of data pre-processing.” The Royal Society of New Zealand now has 382 Fellows and 58 honorary fellows.
Winning wines

Not so long ago, sugar and water were the main ingredients in New Zealand wines, unfermented grape juice had its own category in local wine shows and fortified wines routinely won the awards.

Malcolm Reeves, keynote speaker at the Upper North Island Wine Challenge (UNIWC) awards dinner at Old Government House on Saturday 13 October, reflected on 40 years in the industry.

He said that wine quality had improved considerably during his tenure – a development he attributed to wine science – and predicted that the improvement would continue and would be research-based.

The UNIWC, organised by the University’s Wine Science Programme, was established to meet the need for greater recognition of the region, and its unique and historical contribution to the New Zealand wine industry.

This year, the third the show has run, the trophies for Top Red Table Wine and Kaori New Zealand & Tonellie Saury Best Wine Of The Show went to Expatrius Blend of 8, 2010, from First Growth Ltd’s Waiheke Island vineyard.

“Expatrius Vineyards are very proud to have received the recognition and awards ... especially given that these were our first release of wines having planted our vineyards in 2006 with the clear objective of creating ultra-premium wines from our selected sites,” said Expatrius winemaker Luc Desbonnets. “[They] have given me and my team a great boost.”

Wines from Northland, Auckland, Waikato and Bay of Plenty are eligible for the challenge and 93 were entered into competition. Gold medals were awarded to five wines, and silver and bronze medals went to 14 and 38 wines, respectively.

“[The] wines that won medals have all got that X-factor that we look for,” said Chair of Judges, Simon Nunn. Reds dominated the show, making up two-thirds of entries and winning all the gold medals and trophies.

“One of the main focus points of the [Upper North Island] regions is the reds,” said Chief Steward and wine science tutor Gerard Logan.

“We have our own style and there are some absolutely fantastic wines in the region.”

While run like other competitions, a significant point of difference is how the show works with winemakers. The wineries “get feedback on every wine they’ve entered, both good and bad, and that’s a great innovation,” said Simon. The constructive criticism was very valuable, especially for the many smaller winemakers in the region.

The challenge was also an excellent vehicle for the Wine Science Programme, for students to be exposed to judging and stewarding, and for the region, said Simon. “It’s hard for smaller regions to have a voice … so [the challenge is] a wonderful pedestal for Upper North Island wineries to stand on and say ‘we’re making great wines’.”

The University collects data on all of the wines in competition for detailed analysis. Long term the goal is for its researchers to learn about regional and sub-regional differences between wines and the consequent challenges for winemakers and winemakers, so that this information can be fed back to the industry. Already the feedback is being used as the basis for University workshops with winemakers.

Redevelopment at the Rec Centre

The University of Auckland’s Recreation Centre will soon undergo some redevelopment work to improve its facilities.

Built in 1978, the Rec Centre has had redevelopment done before but the impending work, due to start at the end of the month, is the most significant for some time.

“We’ve had strong growth in memberships and in the number of people using our facilities in recent years, which made the upgrade a necessity if we are to keep encouraging our students and staff to have an active and healthy lifestyle,” says Louis Rattray, Director for Sport and Recreation at the University.

“Part of the long-term strategy is to make larger improvements to the centre. This redevelopment work is part of that longer term strategy to improve our facilities.”

Redevelopment work is scheduled for all four levels of the Rec Centre, with work being done to not only provide more space but also to make sure the centre is a more comfortable place to use.

Sean Smith, Recreation Facilities Manager, says those who use the centre will notice the improvement when work is completed, before the start of the first semester next year.

“We’ll have a designated stretch studio and a new spin studio for one of our more popular group fitness classes. We’re also making improvements to the recreational area on level four, so that it’s more accessible for those who use the space.

“One of the more important changes is the work in the changing rooms, where we’re adding new showers, and in the work we’re doing to improve our ventilation systems.”

The redevelopment work was timed to take place where disruption will be kept to a minimum and it is expected that members and users of the centre will be able to continue almost as usual.

“We’re hoping to keep disruption to a minimum but we’ll be keeping our website up-to-date and will be in touch with members and users of the centre to make sure they’re kept informed, should access to facilities be affected,” says Sean.

The work is scheduled to start on 29 October. For more information about the redevelopment, please visit www.universitysport.auckland.ac.nz/redev
Emeritus Professor George Ferguson’s 43 years of service to the University as one of the founding academic members of the Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering was honoured at a retirement dinner recently.

Some 70 guests attended, including George’s wife Claire, his two daughters Stephanie and Lisa and son Jonathan, their partners and several grandchildren, as well as current and former members of the department and the Faculty of Engineering, and two former deans, Emeritus Professor Ray Meyer and Professor Roy Sharp. Together they celebrated George’s outstanding contributions to the University during his long academic career, with an evening of dining together and the sharing of many hilarious stories, both ancient and modern.

George joined the Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering as a young lecturer at its year of inception, 1968, after completing postdoctoral studies at both Berkeley and Oxford. His pivotal contributions to the establishing and development of the department’s dual-track chemical and materials degree programme, and as Head of Department from 2004-2008, have been enormous. Tributes were heaped on George for his service at all levels of the University: the wisdom, insights and perceptive comments that he brought to so many committees, discussions and conversations of both an academic and administrative nature will not be forgotten.

George’s great research “love” was fracture mechanics, an area of materials behaviour of huge practical importance. It is a discipline that has had far-reaching engineering ramifications especially with respect to the design of steel reinforced structures in earthquake-prone New Zealand. Of particular engineering significance has been George’s work on the deep cycle fatigue failure of welded steel joints and the development of new standards that specify critical levels of ductility in reinforcing steel required to meet earthquake standards. These achievements reflect George’s unique set of intellectual qualities – his fundamental physical and mathematical rigour, his core training in mechanical analysis, and his insightful understanding of the science of materials behaviour. These have enabled him to make a quite remarkable contribution, both nationally and internationally, across the disciplines of civil, mechanical and materials engineering.

As a fitting, though slightly quirky, recognition of George’s research involvement in reinforced steel and his administrative abilities, a member of the department’s technical staff Raymond Hoffmann fashioned a steel reinforcing bar to be an enlarged model of George’s classic signature. All in the department familiar with the manner in which his classic signature “W G Ferguson” was added to every document that passed his careful scrutiny will relate fondly to this quite magnificent piece of engineered artwork.

As a department we are truly grateful for all that George has given us over these 43 plus years. We all wish Emeritus Professor George a warm and fulfilling retirement, and one to be enjoyed with his life-friend and wife Claire.

Staff of Chemicals and Materials Engineering

Marsden Fund 21023 – road shows

Interested in applying to the Marsden Fund in 2013? Funder road shows will be held in November at various University of Auckland locations. Meet Royal Society representatives and hear the latest advice and guidance for applying to this prestigious fund. Details available 1 November from the Research Office. Contact Chris Tews (c.tews@auckland.ac.nz) or Jing Liu (j.liu@auckland.ac.nz). Expressions of Interest are to be completed by February 2013.

Open innovation seminar – Nat Torkington

As part of the Research Essentials Programme, Nat Torkington will be speaking about Open Innovation and what it means for universities. Nat co-wrote the bestselling Perl Cookbook: Tips and Tricks for Perl Programmers and chaired the O’Reilly Open Source Convention – the largest conference for open source developers in America. His annual conference, Kiwi Foo Camp, brings together interested New Zealanders from science, business, technology, arts, media, and politics to promote cross-discipline conversations and collaboration. Monday 12 November, 12 Noon-1pm, OGGB case room 3 (260-055). Contact Angela McMahon (a.mcmahon@auckland.ac.nz, ext 87227) for registration. Spaces are limited.

Final closing dates for ethics applications

Researchers are reminded that the final closing dates for ethics applications for 2012 are as follows. Human Ethics applications close on 20 November for the final meeting of UAHPEC on 12 December; Animal Ethics applications close on Monday 12 November for the final meeting of AEC on November 30. Both committees then go into recess until the end of February, 2013. Please check the Research integrity, ethics and biosafety website for further information about making ethics applications. University home » Staff Intranet » Research » Research integrity, ethics and biosafety.

Future Research Leaders Programme (FRLP)

FRLP is a development programme designed to build research leadership capacity in University environments. This is a unique training opportunity for academics that aspire to take on a research leadership role (project and/or people leadership and management). FRLP has eight independent modules. You can choose to only attend one or more. The coming module is: Project Closeout – 27 November, all morning. Register through frlp@auckland.ac.nz. More information, including the 2013 schedule, is available from the staff intranet. University home » Staff Intranet » Research » Strategic development » Future Research Leaders Program
Eldest of 21 children, Paki Harrison grew up in Ruatoria on the East Coast and as a teenager was sent to board at the prestigious Anglican Māori boys’ school, Te Aute College, just out of Hastings. There, the 1920s meeting house, Te Whare o Rangi, is recognised as a masterpiece by Tohunga Whakairo, Pineamine Taiapa (1901-1972) whose iwi was also Ngāti Porou. Taiapa’s mentorship and writings on “The art of adzing” 1972) whose iwi was also Ngāti Porou. Taiapa’s Tohunga Whakairo, Pineamine Taiapa (1901-1972) whose iwi was also Ngāti Porou. Taiapa’s mentorship and writings on “The art of adzing” published in Te Ao Hou 1960 and 1961 encouraged Harrison to devote himself to a life of carving.

As an Auckland teacher, he was sent by the Queen Elizabeth ll Arts Council to demonstrate carving in France in the late 1960s. In 1972, at the age of 45 years, he completed the carving of Te Wai Ariki, at Whaiora Marae in Otara. Another ten wharenui were carved under his supervision, including Tane-nui-o-Rangi, The University of Auckland’s meeting house, which opened in 1998.

For his outstanding leadership in Māori carving, the University had conferred an Honorary Doctorate of Literature on Paki Harrison in 1991. With his wife, the weaver Hinemoa Harrison, he received the 1997 Te Waka Tai award for lifetime achievement and a Queens Service Order followed in 2000. The Arts Foundation designated him an Icon in 2005, and his work and life were the subject of an award-winning biography by Ranginui Walker in 2008.

Harrison published knowledgeably about carving traditions, noting that: “The art of carving in wood is one of the means by which the “aho” or strands of valued knowledge was preserved by the tribal carvers. With the adze and chisel they devised a system of symbols and mnemonics through which they found a uniquely artistic expression. The adze therefore is the instrument of communication which linked the past with the present.”

The title of this carving, which was commissioned by the History Department 20 years ago in 1992, is Te Ara o Haere, the Pathway of History. Equivalent names for Haere are, Kahukura, Uenuku and Mua. These deities are keepers of various tribal wänanga whose collective symbol is the rainbow which is represented by the tiwhata (curved lines) on the forehead. Harrison notes in the accompanying text that the word “haere” (proceeding) was adopted by the ancients to personify their history: “Tahaereroa (to carve a long pathway) haere wae wae (trodden pathway) haere mai tua (pathway from beyond) haere ma whano (come and proceed onwards) are some of the series used to define aspects of the past, present and the future.”

This carving portrays Haere holding the adze in his left hand, which is the side of Tu, the atua or god of humankind and war, personifying the struggle for existence.

Haere is said to stand with one foot on the land and one on the ocean. The spatulate left foot, together with the fish-scale pattern, enhances this symbolism. The right leg is firmly planted in the past and present, while the uncertainty of the future is more apparent with the smaller and more tentative uplifted left foot.

Harrison concludes his description of the significance of the symbolism in this carving by stating: “The enigmatic and mystical Maui (the word means past and future simultaneously) aptly describes the state of perpetuity which is a characteristic invested in ultra-beings or deities, and perhaps in historians.”

Linda Tyler

Pakariki Harrison (1928-2008), Ngāti Porou, Te Ara Haere (The Pathway of History), 1992, carved wood.

The Oxford Dictionary of Pragmatics

This dictionary, by Professor Yan Huang (Applied Language Studies and Linguistics), published by Oxford University Press, provides a full and authoritative guide to the meanings of the terms, concepts, and theories employed in pragmatics, the study of language in use.

Pragmatics is a central subject in linguistics and philosophy and an increasingly important topic in fields such as cognitive science, informatics, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, and pathology. Its rapid development has produced new theories, methods, approaches, and schools of thought. These in turn have resulted in a vast vocabulary of new terms and in modiﬁed meanings for existing terms. In this dictionary, Yan Huang defines and explains them all, from the most traditional to the most recent.

Written by one of the leading experts in the field and covering every branch of research and all theoretical approaches, Yan Huang’s dictionary, the first of its kind ever published, will be a much valued resource for students and researchers in every aspect of the field.

What's on

THURSDAY 25 OCTOBER

Australasian ICSEI Interactive Symposium
Waipuna Lodge. Runs until 27 October. The Faculty of Education invites you to join them to tackle the challenges of schooling improvement and transforming education in a 21st century learning environment. Queries to Natasha at ICSEISymposium@auckland.ac.nz

Inaugural lecture
By new professors at The University of Auckland.

TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER

Future Proof lecture
Hugh Byrd. Compact cities: Shaping the city with emerging technologies. 12noon-1pm, Design Theatre, Building 423, 22 Symonds St. Free. Queries to n.g@ auckland.ac.nz

Visit www.create.auckland.ac.nz/uaa/ future-proof

Bioengineering research seminar
Mark Finch, Research Engineer, ABl: “My new theory of inertia doesn’t seem to be gaining momentum…” 4-5.30pm Ground Floor Seminar Rm G010, UniServices House, 70 Symonds St.

SATURDAY 27 OCTOBER

The Exit Show
10am-3pm, 2 Marsten St, Parnell. Runs until 28 October. Master of Architecture (Professional) degree students present fresh ideas and approaches to architecture including coastal landscapes, urban design. China’s burgeoning cities and the reconstruction of Christchurch. The exhibition at 2 Marston St, Parnell, will be open to the public on 27 and 28 October, from 10am to 3pm.

Frances Cooper, Constructions Wynyard Island in the Waitemata Harbour.

Classifieds

ACCOMMODATION AVAILABLE

A refreshing haven for a month (14 Nov-15 Dec 2012), convenient, central location (Glenmore, St Heliers Bay). Offering three bdrms, office, family room, SKY, Internet connection, superb outdoor entertaining area, swimming pool, lovely sea views. A bargain at $700 pw. Phone (09) 575 5738 or email riddellbren@hotmail.com

Apartments for rent. Call us for your rental requirements; we offer city apartments furnished/unfurnished, all sizes and prices, great rental deals for long term leases; call David Feng (09) 303 0601 or Lauren Valacorte (021) 103 4865 at City Sales or rentals@citysales.co.nz or log on to www.citysales.co.nz/rentals

Kohimarama house for rent. Enjoy the stunning eastern beaches this summer while living in a 1930s’ character house 1km from Kohi beach. Sunny with spectacular views, four bdrms, three bthrms, designer kitchen, warm timber floors. $950 pw. Available 30 November - mid March. Contact Maree, mareessimpson@hotmail.com or (09) 522-1412.

ACCOMMODATION REQUIRED

Housesitter available. I am a reliable, tidy woman looking to housesit for a few months (or more, if I’m flexible). I am working for the University, non-smoker and a well-educated person who knows how to take care of a house. Contact (021) 0810 9964 or b.shink@ auckland.ac.nz

WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER

2012 Bruce Jesson Lecture
Nicki Hager: Investigative journalism in the age of media meltdown 6.30pm Maxmedent Theatre, Alfred St.

Fireworks
The Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and The University of Auckland’s Dance Studies Programme collaborate to create an evening of dance and music. 7pm, TelstraClear Pacific Events Centre, Manukau. Bookings www.apo.co.nz or 623 1052. Visit www.clear.org.nz

THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER

Word fundamentals
1-4pm, 2nd Floor, Fisher Bldg, 18 Waterloo Quadrant.

Visit www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/workshops and click on IT Training.

FRIDAY 2 NOVEMBER

Powerpoint intermediate
9am-12noon 2nd Floor, Fisher Bldg, 18 Waterloo Quadrant. Visit www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/workshops and click on IT Training.

TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER

Bioengineering research seminar
Prof. Jillian Cornish, Dept of Cell and Molecular Biology and Dr Justin Fernandez. Integrating computational testing with clinical indices to evaluate the influence of fluoride on bone quality. 4-5pm Ground Floor Seminar Rm G010, UniServices House, 70 Symonds St.

MISCELLANEOUS

City Legal Services. Rainey Collins Wright is a small law firm centrally located at L1 Princes Court, 2 Princes Street. We are near the University, with good parking. We can assist with property transactions, trusts, wills, administration of estates, enduring powers of attorney and relationship property matters. Please phone our senior solicitor Nichola Christie on 379 5828 to discuss your needs, or email nchristie@rainey.co.nz Visit www.rainey.co.nz

Clear Word Consulting Ltd. editing and proofreading services.

Mark Finch, Research Engineer, ABl: “My new theory of inertia doesn’t seem to be gaining momentum…” 4-5.30pm Ground Floor Seminar Rm G010, UniServices House, 70 Symonds St.

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For a full list of The University of Auckland events see www.auckland.ac.nz/events
Please email classified ads to uninewsadvertising@auckland.ac.nz nine days before publication. Cost $20 (incl GST).
In August the Justice Minister, Judith Collins, announced that the provision of six sessions of counselling for couples facing separations will no longer receive funding on the grounds it is “not financially sustainable”.

Based on my experience working with couples in crisis, this short-sighted cost-cutting measure will have long-term impacts on mental health and the wellbeing of family life in New Zealand.

I practised as a psychologist in West Auckland in the early 1980s at a time when sprawling suburbs like Massey and Te Atatu had created ideal breeding grounds for a range of serious mental health issues. It was a time when young families, struggling to keep afloat, encountered an unfriendly environment of isolated cul-de-sacs, poor systems of transport, poor access to shops and undeveloped community supports.

The early period of caring for children is very stressful — no matter what the context — but add, on top of this, isolation from family, poor urban design and inadequate community resources, and one has a recipe for personal and family adversity. Our team had difficulty coping with the flood of people struggling with major mental health issues, conflict-ridden separations, violence and, of course, the consequent negative impacts on children.

With this experience in mind, I could not help being impressed by the foresight of Government when through the 1980s they gradually established the Family Court system with an emphasis on both judicial functions and therapeutic goals, the latter built around the provision of couple counselling.

In hindsight, many of the Section 9 couples I counselled were similar to those who I saw earlier in West Auckland — young, overwhelmed by children and struggling with finances and work — but the difference was that they were receiving help months before problems had escalated and before mutual respect had disintegrated. The storm had not fully burst so they were still at a point to look at things differently and explore alternative ways of responding. It was a very positive way of preventing much larger problems.

No system is perfect and the quality of counselling no doubt varies considerably, but it is a system that has enabled people at a critical moment to address issues before they spiral into more damaging situations; the counselling occurs before positions become entrenched, before labels are applied and before damaging words and deeds propel matters to a new level.

It now seems strange, if not perverse, to hear that Government has decided to invest more into mediation — when positions have become more entrenched — and less into systems that offer the prospect of diffusing unnecessary and damaging conflict. Mediation provides an important opportunity for resolving disputes, but it is an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff; it comes too late in enabling couples to work out their own pathways.

The pressures on families have not diminished, particularly those associated with lack of finance and support. Ironically, those that most benefited from counselling are those who are least likely to have available the $900 for what it will cost in the future. Without intervention options many will find themselves trapped on that roller-coaster ride that leads on to the wellbeing challenges familiar in the past.

In my opinion the Minister of Justice is leading us in a giant step backwards to a time when we only tackled problems once they were too large to do anything about. The down-stream costs in terms of mental health and family wellbeing surely outweigh any short-term advantages.

Associate Professor Peter Adams
School of Public Health