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Community at the heart of new Centre for Brain Research

Community Partners help launch CBR

"The dream becomes reality," beamed one very happy Professor Richard Faull at the official opening of the Centre for Brain Research on 6 November.

Representatives of community organisations from across New Zealand attended the launch, held in redeveloped \$16 million laboratories at The University of Auckland. More than 250 guests witnessed the Minister for Research, Science and Technology, the Hon. Dr Wayne Mapp, open the Centre.

The Centre harnesses the combined expertise of what Richard calls 'three pillars of strength' – the University's neuroscience researchers, Auckland hospitals' neurologists and neurosurgeons and, most importantly, communities. Professor Faull is the patron of the Alzheimer's Foundation (Auckland), Alzheimers New Zealand Charitable Trust and the Huntington's Disease Association (Auckland and Northland), and the Medical Patron of the Motor Neurone Disease Association of New Zealand.

"Those three pillars are at the very heart of what the centre is about," enthused Richard. "By working together we will ensure our research is of the highest international standards. That is the vision; that is the excitement; and that is the enormous challenge."

The Centre works with 14 'Community Partners', community NGOs who have established links with the scientists over the years.

More than 200 researchers from across the University will work together on different types of brain disease. One of the key areas of research focuses on the Neurological Foundation of New Zealand Human Brain Bank. The ultimate hope is identifying and developing new treatments for neurological disorders – not only new drug therapies but also new rehabilitation techniques and new evidence-based clinical care regimes.

Taking treatments into the clinic and community is the central aim of neurologist Professor Alan Barber, the Deputy-Director of the Centre. Professor Barber is the head of the Stroke Service at Auckland District Health Board and holds the Neurological Foundation of New Zealand Chair in Clinical Neurology, as well as being the Medical Advisor to the Stroke Foundation (Northern Region).

"Working together means that the questions our researchers ask are the ones clinicians want answers to," says Alan. "And at the other end we hope to be able to take the basic science research that has been done and translate it into new therapies and treatments for patients."

Establishing the centre represented an enormous team effort, says Richard. "We have been guided by the skills and expertise of scientists. But helping them along the way has been the hopes and enthusiasm of so many people. This place is all about people. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata."

Inspiring a hive of research activity

That key message was underlined a week after the launch, when one family decided to donate valuable artwork to the Centre. Artist Agnes Wood has supported Professor Richard Faull's research programme for over five years, throughout Agnes' daughter Elizabeth's battle and subsequent loss to Alzheimer's disease. On the day of the launch Agnes, who is now 88, announced she would like to inspire the future of the Centre.

"Richard had come to see my paintings in the Remuera gallery a few weeks ago, when I saw him looking at another picture, and his face just lit up," says Agnes. "It was one of a head and brain of course, and I knew he had to have it!"

The painting is called an 'Archaic Greek Head' by Paul Radford, an Elam School of Fine Arts graduate and New Zealand painter. Worth over \$5000, the artwork was hung in the CBR in a special ceremony a week after the launch. Agnes' son Chris Wood and her son-in-law Derek Smith were also present.

The family believes the painting is a fitting tribute to Elizabeth, who died in 2007. Elizabeth gifted her brain to the Neurological Foundation of New Zealand Human Brain Bank, of which Richard is the Director, to further research into Alzheimer's disease.

"This art is highly relevant to the Centre, with all the figures and work going on in the head," says Derek. "It's such a wonderful memorial to my wife."

Agnes described the painting as a 'hive of activity', and feels it has a special meaning for the Centre. It was a message that hit home for Richard.

"Agnes' family have contributed to our research in very special ways. Now our next step is to make sure the Centre lives up to their dream."

For further information:

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