



Auckland Medical History Society

MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

WEDNESDAY

6 May 2026 at 7 pm

Venue

Ernest and Marion Davis Library (EMDL)

Building 43, Auckland City Hospital

LECTURES

6 May

Paget's Disease is disappearing
- a Medical Mystery

By Tim Cundy

The cause of Kuru and Dick
Hornabrook's role in its
investigation

By David Abernethy

Abstracts and biographical details of the presenters – see over

The EMDL will be open from **6.15 pm** **Coffee, tea and snacks pre-meeting**

All welcome – bookings are not required

*See the AMHS website Latest News page for updates and links to the
2026 programme page*



Auckland Medical History Society

Paget's Disease is disappearing - a Medical Mystery

Presented by Tim Cundy

Abstract Paget's disease of bone emerged as a distinct entity in Britain in the late nineteenth century when it was prevalent, and florid presentation not uncommon. Epidemiological surveys in the 1970s showed that Britain had a substantially higher prevalence of Paget's disease than any other country, but the prevalence was also high in some of its colonies, including New Zealand. More recent studies have documented an unexplained change in presentation, with a greatly reduced prevalence and less severe disease than formerly, a phenomenon seen even in families with a known genetic predisposition. In 40 years Paget's disease has changed from a common to a rare disorder. How can we explain the geography and changing face of Paget's disease?

Biography

Tim Cundy is an Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Auckland. He trained in diabetes and endocrinology in London and Oxford and came to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1988. He retired in 2022 after 47 years' practice in clinical and academic medicine. His major areas of interest and research included metabolic and genetic bone diseases.

The cause of Kuru and Dick Hornabrook's role in its investigation

Presented by David Abernethy

Abstract When I was a neurology trainee in Wellington in 1984 it was bruited about that Dick, known locally as a mater clinician, was as deserving as Carleton Gajusek of the Nobel prize for the discovery of the cause of **Kuru**. Ian MacFarlane Burnett from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of medical research, a renowned virologist and immunologist, put together an Australasian scientific team to compete with and if possible control the investigation of Kuru by D Carleton Gajdusek. Carleton was seen as an unscrupulous medical pirate, and an American at that with all the wealth and access to expertise that implied. The team needed a Queen Square trained neurologist to examine the patients first hand and resolve the puzzle of the novel combination of disabling tremor, myoclonus, ataxia and cognitive decline, and define the time course of the illness. Dick accepted the job, and his family moved to New Guinea in late 1962. Dick worked alongside Carleton whom no-one could resent for long. The critical clue to the puzzle was in fact proposed in 1959. Carleton later received the Nobel prize for his work demonstrating the transmissible cause of Kuru, and Stanley Pruisner working in his laboratory demonstrated PRIONS as the underlying mechanism. This theory explained extraordinary features of Kuru, and remains relevant to sporadic and iatrogenic CJD and possibly to the aetiology of Parkinsons and related neurodegenerations.

Biography

David Abernethy was born in Whakatane and educated in Auckland and at Otago Medical School at Otago. He was a general medicine and neurology trainee in Wellington followed by 3 years of research into the biology of peripheral nerve regeneration with PK Thomas at the Royal Free hospital. He was consultant neurologist and senior lecturer in neurology at University of Otago Wellington from 1990 to retirement in 2020. Dick Hornabrook was his mentor, and through him he met Carlton Gajdusek in the late 1980s