

THE JOHN CURTIN SCHOOL OF
MEDICAL RESEARCH

**THE JOHN CURTIN SCHOOL OF
MEDICAL RESEARCH**

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS, 1948–1998

Frank Fenner and David Curtis

*Visiting Fellows
The John Curtin School of Medical Research*



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Foreword

If Men Could Learn From History, What Lessons It Might Teach Us – Coleridge

The John Curtin School of Medical Research has a very distinguished history, and its glittering prizes are unequalled in the history of medical research in Australia. It was created as a unique institution, and a unique institution it remains.

The authors of this book are two of our most distinguished alumni, and both are former Directors. Together they bring over 90 years at the Australian National University to the task, and both have ongoing and valued associations with the School.

Both Carlyle and Emerson commented on the essential role of biography in history. Fenner and Curtis have followed this tradition by inviting former and current staff to give personal accounts of some aspects of their work in the School. Given the many forceful personalities who have spent all or much of their working lives in the School, it is not surprising that the School has had its fair share of controversy. Few academic institutions of any merit could not say the same. But the John Curtin School, by virtue of its position in the national capital, lives in the constant spotlight of media attention and that has tended to further colour its already colourful history. The publication of this book was made possible by a very generous donation from Frank Fenner. His generosity of spirit is part of the fabric of our School.

*Judith A. Whitworth
June 2001*

Preface

Medical research in Australia has always operated in a different way from research in other fields of natural science. Besides the research carried out in university departments, universities with medical schools have facilities for clinical and associated diagnostic laboratory research in their teaching hospitals. In addition, medical research institutes devoted to basic laboratory research have been developed in some of the larger hospitals. In prewar years, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, attached to the Melbourne Hospital, was pre-eminent, the Baker Research Institute had been established at the Alfred Hospital, the Kanematsu Institute at the Sydney Hospital and the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Research at the Adelaide Hospital. Although sometimes loosely affiliated with local universities, these were separate institutions and their Boards or Councils, through the Institute Directors, were in control of their affairs. All were small institutions, with some 20-30 total staff, and they often took responsibility for some of the affiliated hospital laboratory diagnostic work as well.

In 1996, fifty years after passage of the Australian National University Act through the Parliament of the Commonwealth, Foster and Varghese published a splendid history of that university: *The Making of the Australian National University 1946 to 1996*. Uniquely in Australia, it was set up as a research-only university, and one of the four founding Research Schools was the John Curtin School of the Medical Research. The present book traces the development of that School between its foundation and 1998. It is in part an acknowledgement of our personal indebtedness to the John Curtin School and the Australian National University. We are both medical graduates, and became involved in basic biomedical research in an endeavour to contribute to an understanding of the causes, prevention and management of particular human illnesses. We were both fortunate in beginning our research careers with outstanding Australian biomedical scientists: Fenner in 1946 with Macfarlane Burnet at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and Curtis in 1954 with John Eccles at the John Curtin School. Our personal scientific achievements were made possible by the superb research facilities which became available in Canberra (Fenner 1948–73, Curtis 1954–95), and we have both been Directors of the School, although under different circumstances: Fenner, in 1967–73, a period of stability and expansion; Curtis, in 1989–92, a period of threat. As Visiting Fellows we have maintained links with the School since our retirement.

In this book we have endeavoured to cover the administrative history of the School from its origins in the mid-1940s to 1998, giving recognition to the technical and clerical staff who underpin the research as well as to the academic staff, in the eight chapters of Part I. This includes an account of the origin of the School and its development through Departments and Divisions, its expanding Support Services, its funding problems and its external reviews. Part II consists of 89 edited essays describing many of the research achievements which have contributed to the reputation of the School and its scientific staff. Most of these essays have been written by participants in the particular research activity they describe, and a few, which deal with some aspect of the research work of eminent scientists who have died, by their colleagues. We are very grateful to all of these scientists for their contributions, which encompass the wide range of investigations that have been carried out in the School during the last fifty years. We have acknowledged the authors, and some of their co-workers, by including their photographs, each with a brief biographical legend.

Part III contains the names and year of graduation of PhD graduates, the careers of academic staff and their contributions to science and society by work outside the School, the names and where possible the places of origin of the Visiting Fellows who have brought fresh ideas to the School and made its work known and respected nationally and internationally, and the details of funding from sources outside the School budget.

We believe that the original purposes of the John Curtin School, block-funded by the Federal Government to provide opportunities for biomedical scientists to perform long-term research of the highest internationally recognized standard, and to train PhD students and postdoctoral scientists who subsequently contribute to the expansion of biomedical research in this country, have been amply justified. Furthermore, we agree with the 1995 Maclaren Review Report that the School should continue to be block-funded by the Federal Government in order to support long-term research projects and programs of relevance to modern biomedical research and practice. It also remains important for the School to increase its efforts in seeking external sources of funding, including the NH&MRC from 2001, for specific purposes of a relatively short-term nature and particularly for those having the potential to transfer technology to the market place, in order to ensure its development and stability.

It is our hope that this book will provide current and future staff and students with an understanding of how the School, and biomedical science, have developed and changed over the years since 1948, and engender pride in its achievements.

We are deeply indebted to all those who contributed to the book, in the essays, in the provision of information about the varied services that underpin medical research and in assuring the accuracy of the biographical legends associated with many of the illustrations. The University Archivist, Sigrid McCausland, the School Secretary, Regina Gorecki, the Academic Assistant to the Director, Peter Jeffrey, the Business Manager, Philip Bunyan, and University Records have provided access to records and information on a variety of technical details that were not otherwise readily available. Divisional Administrative Assistants Moya Goodisson, Elizabeth McNaughton, Roulas Mitigas and Esme Weil, and Ian Carter helped trace the careers of academic staff and Visiting Fellows). Retired technical staff, especially Leo Davenport and Desmond Maguire, have helped us identify persons in some of the early photographs. We would especially like to acknowledge the help of the Photographic Section, notably Stuart Butterworth, Karen Edwards, Julie Macklin and Marc Fenning, for the production of the photographs, selected from their splendid collection. It has been a pleasure to work with a former Head of the Department of Human Genetics and now Manager of Brolga Press, Robert Kirk, and his colleague Graeme Challinor, in the production of the book.

*Frank Fenner
David Curtis
August 2001*

Part I

Development and Change

The Australian National University was established by Act of Parliament in August 1946, as an all-research university with four Research Schools. The John Curtin School of Medical Research was one of these. Its origins are traced in Chapter 1, and are notable for the strong influence on its organization exerted by Sir Howard Florey, who also supervised a small Department of Experimental Pathology for the ANU in Oxford. The first four professors were appointed to head departments in 1948-51. Since there was no laboratory accommodation in Canberra, they worked in laboratories 'on loan' in Dunedin, London and Melbourne. In September 1951 Council authorized the building of 'temporary' wooden laboratories in Canberra, into which four of the departments moved in 1952-54. Chapter 2 recounts the history of these years, during which the permanent building was planned and constructed.

The building was completed and occupied in 1957, and officially opened in 1958. Chapter 3 covers the period during which Hugh Ennor was Head of School, and describes the expansion from five to eight departments made possible by the increased space. With his resignation in 1967 Frank Fenner was appointed Director and Chapter 4 outlines how some departments were discontinued and others established, including a Department of Clinical Science in the local hospital. There followed a period of consolidation, with Colin Courtice and Frank Gibson serving as Directors. During this period, which is covered in Chapter 5, the School had its first review by an outside panel of experts.

Influenced by the review, in 1980 Robert Porter was appointed as the first Director from outside the School. As described in Chapter 6, many of the recommendations made by the review committee were put into effect and the School continued to grow in spite of decreasing Government funding. Chapter 7 describes how in 1988 a major reorganization of the School was initiated, in which eight departments and six small units were replaced by four large divisions corresponding roughly to the four major research fields covered by the School. Porter resigned in 1989, and David Curtis, head of one of the divisions, became Director and had to cope with a plethora of external reviews, one of which threatened the existence of the School. Fortunately, this was prevented by the report of a Senate Committee. When Curtis retired in 1992 Kevin Lafferty, a former senior scientist from the School who had spent six years in the United States, was appointed Director and, as described in Chapter 8, brought a new approach to the problem of coping with ever-diminishing Government funding.

The foregoing account does not do justice to the range of information, activities and personalities covered in the text, tables and illustrations in these eight chapters, but gives a flavour of what is there. Read on!

