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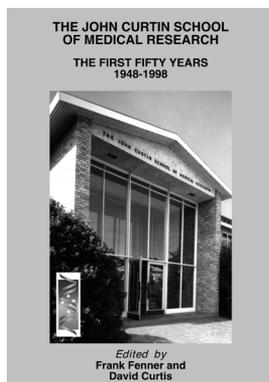


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Frank Fenner and David Curtis (eds):
The John Curtin School of Medical Research: The First Fifty Years, 1948–1998. Gundaroo: Brolga Press, 2001, 565pp, illus., ISBN 875495 33 9 (HB), \$55.



‘The John Curtin School of Medical Research’, writes its present director Judith Whitworth in her foreword to the book, ‘was created as a unique institution, and a unique institution it remains... [I]ts glittering prizes’, she adds, ‘are unequalled in the history of medical research in Australia’.

This blockbuster volume, edited by two distinguished former JCSMR directors, Frank Fenner and David Curtis, and drawing on some eighty-nine present or former in-house contributors for overviews of their and their colleagues’ research, clearly confirms this claim. It reveals the complex growth of the institution, its significant personnel, and the rich stream of biomedical research that emerged during this half century of Australia’s history.

The John Curtin School of Medical Research, established with generous Commonwealth funding in 1948 as one of the four founding Research Schools of the Australian National University, was launched under the influential guidance and planning of medical expatriate Sir Howard Florey. It quickly attracted many

innovative researchers. Under its four ‘pioneer’ professors, Hugh Ennor, John Eccles, Frank Fenner and Adrien Albert, the School drew in a creative and expanding staff and a growing corps of PhD students who both assisted in fuelling the research and fulfilled the School’s early purpose of providing a body of highly-trained medical researchers in Australia.

Over the next fifty years, JCHMR embraced research over an expanding compass. It spread across the fields of neuroscience, microbiology, immunology, biochemistry, cell biology, human genetics, medical chemistry, clinical science, international health, and integrative biology, a span in biomedical research wider than most world medical research institutes and one that won the School and its researchers high international acclaim. Three staff members, John Eccles, Peter Doherty and Rolf Zinkernagel, were awarded the Nobel Prize; Frank Fenner won the prestigious Japan Prize for a cumulative contribution to medical science; fifteen JCSMR researchers were elected Fellows of the Royal Society of London, and thirty five Fellows of the Australian Academy of Science. The School trained five hundred and twenty-six PhD graduates and produced sixty-four books and 8354 refereed journal papers or book chapters.

The editors have set out to cover this large terrain in three sections. Part I traces the School’s institutional history, its growth and change; Part II provides ‘Highlights of Research’, and Part III Appendices gives lists of details of academic staff, visiting fellows, graduate students, external grants, and services to outside organisations by members of JCSMR. Throughout, photographs and brief biographies of key participants are interwoven with text. *The John Curtin School of Medical Research* attends carefully to support and administrative staff, and it provides a separate name and subject index.

As such this exhaustive work represents a remarkable archival source. It will be especially useful to students of science, medicine and history eager to explore such topics as the development of medical research, the culture or sociology of a medical institution, the role of women therein, the changing part played by technology, technicians and engineers in biomedical research, animal breeding approaches, and the mobility of scientists, to suggest a few. David Curtis's account of 'Life in Eccles' laboratory' provides a particular insight from a one-time student into the exciting early environment of the School at a time that Eccles himself acknowledged 'marked the highpoint' of his research career.

The heart of the book lies in Part II 'Highlights of Research' with its overviews and some brief detailed accounts of fundamental research performed in the school on subjects that stretch through transplantation immunobiology, molecular virology, genetics of the HLA system, myxomatosis, population genetic studies, computation and informatics in biomedical science, cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease in Papua New Guinea, malignant hypothermia, immunological responses to influenza, research on HIV/AIDS vaccine,

biological inorganic chemistry, Murray Valley encephalitis, Ross River virus infections, malarial disease, the neurophysiology of the spinal chord, nerve growth factors, the neurophysiology of vision, retinal research, the mysteries of cellular motion, the smallpox eradication programme, spinal excitatory and inhibitory pathways, urban biology, and many more.

Having said this, this work is not an evaluative history. Despite a plethora of external reviews of the John Curtin School across its history and a broad range of interplay of directors of differing temperament and style, those looking for crucial judgement on the problems, conflicts, and progress of a medical research establishment which 'with its many forceful personalities has', in the words of its present director, 'had its fair share of controversy', will not find it in these pages. Such critical assessments remain to be made. Rather, Fenner and Curtis as writers and editors have given us a monumental documentary record of one of Australia's pre-eminent medical research organisations that will long serve to inform and underpin historical knowledge.

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