

# History

**The New Zealand Microbiological Society was originally founded in 1956 to promote and disseminate knowledge of microbiology in New Zealand.**

## General History: the Founding of NZMS

By the middle of the twentieth century there were many microbiologists active in universities, hospitals, government-supported research centres and industry, but they were working in small isolated groups and rarely met. About the only opportunities they had to come together for exchange of information and to learn of recent developments in the discipline were at the appropriate Section meetings of the infrequent Science Congresses organised by the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ) and the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS). A more detailed summary of the history of microbiology in New Zealand can be found [here](#).

It is largely due to the enthusiasm and drive of [Royd Thornton](#) and Harvey Smith of the Plant Diseases Division of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) that a New Zealand society for microbiology was established. During the 1954 RSNZ Science Congress in Auckland they convened a meeting to consider the formation of a New Zealand Microbiological Society. About 20 microbiologists attended and after discussion, resolved to form a New Zealand society for microbiology and elected a subcommittee consisting of [Royd Thornton](#), Harvey Smith and Harry Jacks who were instructed to, firstly find out the level of support for a society by circulating interested people, and secondly to draw up plans for the organisation and conduct of the Society, with a proviso that the aim be not too ambitious at this early stage.

Provisional Rules were minuted from the meeting.

**Aim:** To promote the advancement of Microbiology in New Zealand by helping those studying micro-organisms to exchange ideas and information both within and outside New Zealand.

**Membership:** Any persons interested in the activities of micro-organisms.

**Scope:**

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- To provide a register of New Zealand microbiologists and their respective fields.
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- To establish contact and liaise with overseas organisations.
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- To disseminate and gather information on microbiology.
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- To aid visiting microbiologists.
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- To arrange meetings from time to time.

In May 1956 the inaugural meeting of the New Zealand Microbiological Society was held at Victoria University College in Wellington. After some discussion and amendments the constitution was adopted and office-bearers elected. The executive committee consisted of a President, Vice-President (President-Elect), Secretary, Treasurer (or Secretary-Treasurer) and two other elected members. The foundation President was [J.O.C. Neill](#), Harry Jacks was Vice-President, Harvey Smith was Secretary-Treasurer, and the Committee was [Royd Thornton](#) and J.G. Gibbs. The newly-elected President delivered the inaugural address which was a philosophical dissertation on the importance of microbial activities to other living organisms, the origin of life and evolution. Then twelve scientific papers were presented, eleven of which were on plant microbiology clearly showing the genesis of the Society.

Twelve months on, the survival of the Society was uncertain until the DSIR, the source of most of the members at that time, added the Society to the list of organisations approved for supported attendance by appropriate DSIR staff members. The future of the Society was then assured, so long as meetings of real value to members could be provided and adequate funds found.

Although plant and soil microbiologists founded the Society, in the passing of years since 1957 it has been strengthened by attracting medical, animal, environmental, industrial and other microbiologists to its membership. Nowadays, however, so many from all groups are molecular biologists that the distinctions are blurred.

## Major Milestones of the Society

The society has survived and prospered for nearly 60 years and has passed many significant milestones. A summary of the major steps in the 'evolution' and development of the society can be found [here](#).

## Improving the Public Image of Microbiology

One of the reasons for establishing a Microbiological Society was to present the work of microbiology more effectively to the public. There have been two main thrusts in this area. First, in an endeavour to increase the amount of microbiology in school curricula members have represented the Society on committees concerned with Science in Schools, liaised with the Science Teachers Association, prepared video tapes and other teaching resources, and run workshops for science teachers. The second thrust has been directed towards the news media. A key to presenting microbiology more effectively to the public is to know how to communicate microbiology clearly and succinctly to journalists. To this end the Society has funded media fellowships, which allow the recipient to work with journalists on science news items, and has also funded media courses for members.

# Previous Committees and Representations of NZMS

Some examples of areas where NZMS has represented New Zealand microbiologists include:

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- A sub-committee investigated the methods used for assessing coliform organisms and published their recommended standard methods in the 1976 volume of the New Zealand Journal of Science.
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- The methods available for testing sanitisers and detergents used in the dairy industry were assessed and the results submitted to the Standards Association in 1978.
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- In 1975 the Society set up a standing committee to investigate the increase and causes of transferable drug resistance factors among organisms in the environment.
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- Through representations to the Health Department, the Agriculture Chemicals Board and the Animal Remedies Board and correspondence with politicians, the registration of some agriculture chemicals containing human therapeutic antibiotics was cancelled. These contacts have also contributed to the establishment of a system for monitoring the antibiotic sensitivity of isolates from hospital and animal health laboratories. Politicians have also been made aware of the danger of increased over-the-counter availability of antibiotics.
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- A sub-committee made submissions and proposed amendments to the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms (HSNO) act; particularly on the issues of importation of new organisms and the development of genetically modified organisms. NZMS still maintains an active role in trying to moderate the often anti-scientific nature of this legislation and the effect it is having on New Zealand researchers; members interested in participating in this area should contact the [president](#).

## Membership of the NZMS

Five classes of member are admitted to the Society. Ordinary, student and corporate members are admitted on approval by the Executive committee. Nominations for affiliated organisation and [honorary membership](#), if approved by the [executive](#) committee, are submitted for election by a general meeting of the Society.

*Ordinary member:* Any person interested in the activities of micro-organisms.

Within five years of establishment the Society had a membership of 100,

increasing steadily to reach 450 twenty years later. After that the number of members fluctuated about 420 until the year 2000 since when the numbers have dropped below 350.

*Student member:* As for ordinary members, but must be a full-time [student](#) .

*Corporate member:* Any company or organisation.

*Affiliated organisation:* Any Society with microbiological interests.

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- The Federation for Medical and Veterinary Mycology
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- The New Zealand Committee for Water Pollution Research and Control
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- The New Zealand Nurses Association National Division of Infection Control Nurses
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- The Fiji Society for Microbiology
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- The Federation of Asian and Pacific Microbiological Societies

*Honorary member:* A person who has given service of outstanding merit to New Zealand microbiology.

**Note:** Further information on membership, membership rates and how to become a member of NZMS can be found [here](#).

## Communicating with the Membership

In the early days of the Society almost the only communication between the committee and the members occurred at the Annual Conferences. As the Society grew the committee recognized the need to communicate more frequently with the membership. Accordingly they decided to circulate a newsletter, the first of which was produced in 1972. It consisted of a single cyclostyled page of quarto paper which was prepared and distributed by the secretary/treasurer. Over the next nine years sixteen newsletters were produced in that form by John McDougall (1972), [Mike Baxter](#) (1974) and [Royd Thornton](#) (1975-1979).

In 1980 Chris Freke accepted the new committee position of editor and changed the format to an A4 folded to A5 booklet containing photocopies of members' typed contributions, a style which was continued for the next 10 years, first by Chris and then by Gail Meekin. [Chris Harfoot](#) took over as editor in 1989 (initially with Hugh Morgan) and in 1991 a glossy A4 format was adopted for the Newsletter. In September 1996 it became a publication with the name, *New Zealand Microbiology* , and its own ISSN number.

The Society embraced modern information technology to improve

communication with its members by creating an internet website in 1997, and in 2002, when Greg Cook had succeeded [Chris Harfoot](#) as editor, by posting the first electronic version of *New Zealand Microbiology* on the website. Two years later, after clear approval by the majority of the membership, the Society moved its publication to the auspices of *NZBioscience*, a journal that it now shares with the New Zealand Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (NZSBMB).

## Annual Scientific Meeting

Each year the society holds an [annual scientific meeting](#), during which the annual general meeting of the society also takes place. The annual meeting of the society provides a forum for the presentation of many of the wonderful scientific discoveries made by the body of professional microbiologists engaged in research activities in New Zealand. Further information on the history of these events can be found [here](#).

These meetings have come a long way since the first meeting took place in 1956. As an interesting comparison, the timetable and speakers list of the first annual meeting can be downloaded [here](#), whilst the timetable from the 50th anniversary meeting can be downloaded [here](#). In addition, a transcript of the presidents inaugural address given at the first annual meeting of the society can be found [here](#) and a complete list of previous conferences and their organisers can be found [here](#).

In addition to now boasting the ability to invite a number of overseas speakers, the NZMS annual meeting also recognises the achievements of one of our own members. An official orator is appointed for each meeting and this person is awarded the NZMS [Distinguished Speaker Award](#) in recognition of the contribution to Microbial Sciences in New Zealand.

## Special Interest Groups (SIG)

The Society has always adopted the policy of encouraging members from all aspects of microbiology, basic and applied, medical and non-medical to be active in the affairs of the Society and to present papers at the Scientific Meetings. As membership of the Society increased there was a perceived need to cater for the specialised interests of different sectors of the membership and the Committee supported the establishment of [SIG](#). The first two, Medical microbiology and Molecular biology were established in 1980 followed over the years by others to result in the eleven we currently maintain. The members of each SIG maintain communication with each other for the purpose of organising meeting either within the Annual Scientific Meeting or as smaller regional meetings.

## Governance of the Society

The society has an executive committee charged with maintaining the day to

day administration. The executive officers are volunteers elected at the AGM. Details of the current executive can be found [here](#), and a complete list of previous officers of the society can be found [here](#).

## Student Membership

Students are actively encouraged to [join](#), belong to and participate in the activities of the society, particularly through reduced membership rates; information of particular relevance to student members is also available [here](#). In addition, NZMS offers student members a number of incentives to present their studies at the [annual meeting](#) of the society through reduced registration fees, grants-in-aid to assist in the costs of attending and several [awards and prizes](#) for presentations and posters.

## Relationship to the Royal Society of New Zealand

In 1967 the Society became a member body of the Royal Society of New Zealand ([RSNZ](#)) which is the national academy of sciences, consisting of a federation of some 60 scientific and technological societies. It promotes a critical awareness of science and technology in schools, in industry and in society, offers science advice to government, and fosters international scientific contact and co-operation.

Although the association with RSNZ has not always run smoothly, partly because the Member Bodies Committee has re-invented itself more than once, the Society has had representation on committees concerned with science in schools, improving the public perception of science, and improving communication amongst biological scientists in New Zealand. The Royal Society's function as a link between the New Zealand Microbiological Society and the International Union of Microbiological Societies has always been important to the Society which successfully lobbied for the formation of a National Committee for Microbiology to take over this task.

## International Associations

In 1960 the Society became a member of the International Union of Microbiological Societies (IUMS), which is one of a number of constituent Unions of the International Council of Scientific Unions. Each Union is a worldwide federation of national and international societies or other organisations having a common interest in a particular science. IUMS has an extensive assemblage of associations, divisions, councils, committees, commissions and federations concerned with all aspects of microbiology.

NZMS members have contributed to the operation of IUMS by filling executive positions in some of these groups and by representing the Society at IUMS meetings, sessions, congresses and symposia. Closer involvement has been

through the organisation of the 1st International Microbial Ecology Symposium in Dunedin in 1977 and the VIIIth Congress of the International Society for Human and Animal Mycology in Palmerston North in 1982.

## Beyond the first 50 years

With the passing of its first 50 years it may be timely to contemplate what lies ahead for the NZMS. The more we learn about the microbes with which we share this planet the more we come to appreciate how delicate the balance is between peaceful, mutually-beneficial coexistence and potential mayhem. Microbiology and those who are skilled in its practice seem assured of on-going relevance in a world of dwindling distances and resources and mounting human dysfunction and discontent.

The challenges are not insignificant. For its operation the Society has always relied heavily upon voluntary input, especially of its executive and the organisers of the annual meetings. The demands on these individuals are considerable. The question is, can the NZMS adapt as quickly as the subjects of its discipline to our rapidly-changing world? Can it in its current form continue to meet its founding objectives, remaining relevant and responsive to the needs of practicing and apprentice microbiologists in New Zealand, while at the same time accommodating the increasing demands placed upon it as a professional interface between microbiologists, industry, the media, politicians, schools and communities?

## The Historians and History of NZMS

The official (and not so official) history of the society has become a labour of love for four society members: [Frank Austin](#), [Terry Maguire](#), [Sandy Smith](#) and [John Tagg](#) and it is thanks to the inordinate efforts of these four that we have both the booklet '*The first 50 years - a brief history of the New Zealand Microbiological Society*' as well as much of the information compiled here on our website. Copies of the written history can be obtained by members by writing to the [secretary](#).

The Society owes these four dedicated members a debt of gratitude for all of the voluntary efforts to ensure that our history has been documented, archived and chronicled.



**The Historians (from left to right):** Dr. Terry Maguire, Dr. Frank Austin, Prof. Sandy Smith\* and Prof. John Tagg

*\* Subsequent to the writing of the history, Prof. Smith sadly passed away*