Kia ora koutou katoa and welcome to Issue 32 of Te Hautaka o Ngā Akonga Rongoā, the New Zealand Medical Student Journal (NZMSJ). The theme of this issue is “Politics and Medicine in Aotearoa”, an important topic for medical students and health professionals. We are proud to share a range of thought-provoking and high-quality articles by medical students, clinicians, and academics from Aotearoa and abroad.

The unprecedented events of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have brought the tightly intertwined relationship between politics and medicine to the forefront of society’s attention. From public health and social measures to reduce the spread of the disease, to the vaccine rollout, the Government’s pandemic response has been guided by the latest scientific research and the voices of expert health professionals and scientists. This interface was also highlighted by the public debates on cannabis and euthanasia laws and subsequent referenda held alongside the 2020 General Election. Many doctors, both locally and internationally, have been the impetus for political change on a range of health-related issues. This role of doctors is encouraged by national and international medical organisations, including the New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA), who outline in their Code of Ethics: “Doctors should accept a share of the profession’s responsibility toward society in matters relating to the health and safety of the public, health promotion and education, environmental issues that have a bearing on the health of individuals and populations, and legislation affecting the health or well-being of the community.”

As a result, we believe medical students and doctors are essential voices at the table of political discussions, and this has therefore motivated the theme of NZMSJ Issue 32.

An overview of this issue’s articles

We are proud to have outstanding editorials from three experts who explore different aspects of politics and medicine in Aotearoa. Dr Ashley Bloomfield discusses the interface between medicine and politics with examples of the challenges and successes he has experienced whilst navigating this political landscape. Dr Bloomfield outlines how this interface is an imperative, and an opportunity which should be used responsibly. Dr Jonathan Coleman explores the roles and responsibilities that medical professionals have in relation to political issues. Dr Coleman provides interesting examples and insights into politics, including some of the challenges and caveats which may be encountered. Professor Boyd Swinburn discusses the causes of policy inertia and the implications of these on disease prevention in Aotearoa. Professor Swinburn also outlines the role of civil society organisations, such as non-governmental organisations, in driving change in our disease prevention policies. He suggests the need to take a “COVID-19 approach” to addressing the social inequities which are driving poor health outcomes in some of our communities. These editorials each provide important messages for medical students and doctors alike. We are very grateful to Dr Bloomfield, Dr Coleman, and Professor Swinburn for their valuable contributions to NZMSJ Issue 32.

In this issue, we have two articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, in a letter to the editor, Leah Sarah Peer describes how virtual volunteerism has been a silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic and an accomplishment for medical students around the globe. Secondly, in a feature article, Dr Shibu Sasidharan explores the associated challenges with undergraduate medical education and lessons gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, with examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

We are fortunate to also include our two regular feature series. In this issue’s Māori Health Review, Nadine Houia-Ashwell explores how the pandemic challenged Māori assertion of Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determination) within the tertiary education sector and by iwi. We are also grateful to include our regular statistics primer, written by Dr Ari Samaranayaka et al., from the University of Otago Biostatistics Unit. Issue 32’s primer focuses on sample size consideration at the time of conceiving and designing a study, and the importance of sample sizes in health research and the overall research process.

This issue includes an impressive selection of academic articles from medical students and clinicians. We are proud to share the first of the NZMSJ’s new academic series, “Clinical Pearls.” This issue’s clinical pearl, by Dr Kaveshan Naidoo and Dr Subaschandra Shetty, explores Eagle’s Syndrome as a differential diagnosis in patients with odynophagia. Muhammad Luthfi Adnan explores the potential antihypertensive activity of probiotic bacteria Lactobacillus casei through gut microbiota modulation, through a narrative literature review. Tim Bridgman carried out a study examining potential predictors of response to immune checkpoint inhibition in patients with metastatic melanoma treated at Christchurch Hospital. We also have two interesting narrative reviews investigating broader determinants of health in the region of the Pacific Islands. The first, by Thomas Swinburn et al., reviews the impact of climate change and food security on health outcomes in Pacific Island countries and territories. The second, by Tahairah Moton et al., explores factors driving noncommunicable diseases in the Pacific region, with a focus on the island of Niue. Dr Oliver Lyons describes a case report of a patient who was managed with an antibiotic desensitisation procedure in order to treat a Streptococcus gallolyticus bacteraemia in the context of a penicillin allergy. We are proud to publish two dermatology essays, by Jamin Kim and Christopher Mayo, who each explore the disability burden of skin diseases. These essays were both awarded the 2020 Wilson-Allison Memorial Prize in Dermatology, sponsored by the New Zealand Dermatological Society Incorporated (NZDSI). This issue also includes the 2020 Bachelor of Medical Sciences with Honours (BMEDSc(Hons)) abstracts from University of Auckland students who have undertaken the intercalated BMEDSc(Hons) research year.

Finally, we would like to congratulate the winners of our Issue 32 Creative Arts Competition: Emi Frost, Ria George, and Hannah S.Y. Kim.
This competition is an ongoing collaboration with the New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA) to showcase our fellow medical students’ creative and artistic talents. This year’s three winning pieces are strongly connected with the theme of mental health and wellbeing. Emi and Ria both submitted powerful poems related to grief and post-partum depression, respectively, whilst Hannah painted a special moment between two children, symbolising our need for maintaining social connection in times of physical distancing.

Acknowledgements and conclusions
The NZMSJ Editorial Board would like to thank the Universities of Auckland and Otago for their financial and academic support for the journal. We would like to thank the Medical Assurance Society (MAS), the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), the Auckland Radiology Group, Specialty Trainees of New Zealand (STONZ), the Goodfellow Unit, and the NZDSI for their generous funding. We would also like to thank Catherine’s Creations, Medisave, Medshop, and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) for sponsoring the prizes for our Researcher Spotlight initiative, and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) for sponsoring our new RANZCOG Blog Post Award for the best student-authored blog post published on the NZMSJ Blog this year. Not least of all, the Editorial Board are indebted to Professor Frank Frizelle for his ongoing financial support for the Verrall Award. The winner of this year’s Verrall award will be chosen from the academic articles included in the NZMSJ issues published this year, and will be announced at the end of the year. We would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA) for their ongoing support, and our Advisory Board members for their continued advice and guidance. Finally, the authors would like to thank the Editorial and Commercial Boards and our student and expert peer reviewers for their exceptional work behind the scenes to enable this issue to be published.

We hope NZMSJ readers will enjoy the wide variety of interesting articles included in Issue 32. We would like to congratulate all of the authors who have contributed, and encourage all readers to submit their work to NZMSJ in the future.

“The real question now is not whether young physicians should have a voice in politics, but just how loud it will become.”

References
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