Barbara Farnsworth Heslop

*Immunologist, academic*

There was probably very little possibility the University of Otago would ever forget one of its most brilliant graduates—and academics—but in establishing the Barbara Heslop Memorial Fund, it has wisely left nothing to chance. The fund has been set up to support a scholarship for research students at Otago, a thoroughly appropriate purpose given Emeritus Prof Heslop’s second-to-none record as a medical researcher.

Dr Heslop, CBE, MD, FRCPath, FRACS, FRSNZ, died in Dunedin in late December, 2013, just a month before her 89th birthday.

Among Dr Heslop’s many post-retirement activities was typing up her recollections of a life well lived and it is on these revealing writings this obituary leans rather heavily.

For example, here is how she reflected on her “retirement”: “I retired from working four times. The first was the compulsory retirement at age 65 (from the university, in 1990). It is no longer compulsory to retire at 65. But at the time I had a programme grant from the MRC [Medical Research Council] that had another year or two to run, so I stayed with that. When that came to an end I still had the FRACS [Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons] course that I was convening and teaching.

“I was teaching immunology in Melbourne (coals to Newcastle!) and Singapore and elsewhere into the 1990s. I decided to stop teaching in Dunedin in the mid-1990s when one of the candidate assessments said ‘perfect’. I might perhaps not have stopped teaching if the assessments had not been as good. But it was clear that there was only one way to go from there down. So it was the right time to stop. That was my third retirement.

“Then, I was on the hospital board (then called a CHE for Crown Health Enterprise and board members were company directors) for three years from 1993. But that’s another story. It wasn’t exactly a job, although we got paid for it, but I learned a bit about hospital management mainly how not to do things in those years.” She also notes that in 1999 she returned to teach undergraduates to “help out with a staffing crisis.”

But it is necessary to turn the clock right back to get a full picture of the exceptional life of Dr Heslop, who was born in Auckland in January, 1925, to John Sampson Cupit (emigrated by Derbyshire, UK) and his wife Isabel. They gave their daughter
“Farnsworth” as her second name because her paternal grandmother was Caroline Farnsworth.

Dr Heslop's parents had a major influence on her life, especially her father who worked in the child welfare department in Auckland. She says both parents were “bookish—we had quite a scholarly home library for New Zealand suburbia, virtually the complete works of the classical English poets and writers. Nobody else that I knew had anything quite like this. I never had trouble looking up literary references at school—we had them in the house. My mother rated Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as a favourite book.”

While attending Epsom Girls Grammar School, Dr Heslop says she always knew she would go on to university as well even though “for most girls” in the 1930s, that was not a realistic goal—“in my primary school days, compulsory schooling stopped at about 12, when one got the so-called proficiency certificate.”

But it never occurred to her that university study was an unusual expectation. “My father had always said ‘You can do anything you want to’, and I didn't question it, so I was really somewhat cocooned from the prevailing social mores. My mother also advised against getting married too early and without qualifications and getting stranded in suburbia. So the ‘glory box’ was a non-issue—in fact the whole idea was a bit of a joke,” she wrote.

But Dr Heslop's field of interest was medicine, not one that many women were attracted to in those days. She recalls many fathers obstructed most ambitious girls, or at least steered them into domesticity. Hers, however, did the opposite, so, after winning a University Entrance scholarship, she moved south to Dunedin to attend Otago University.

Getting into the Medical School during the latter stages of the Second World War was relatively “easy” and finding student life in the south greatly agreed with her, she graduated with a degree in medicine in 1948, then began working towards her MD. Incidentally, 14 members of her graduating class went on to become professors.

It was around this time she met her future husband John Heslop, who was one year behind her at medical school. They were to get to know each other a lot more as house surgeons at Dunedin Hospital around 1950.

Looking back at her life at the Medical School, Dr Heslop recalls her ambitions to become a “career woman” were at variance with the prevailing attitudes of the day which “didn't really expect very much of medical women after graduation”, an attitude that lasted until well into the 1970s.

“The opinion was widely expressed that the women dropped out (or dropped down) for domestic reasons. In many ways this viewpoint seemed justified—women simply didn’t go for the top jobs. It was only when the numbers of women in the medical classes started to increase that the necessity to arrange jobs a little more imaginatively than had been done previously occurred to the administration.” It was, however, very much a male-dominated world. Women were invited to attend functions after the men-only dinners. Yet, she wrote, “strangely enough, we didn't object; it was just the way things were.”
Undaunted, Dr Heslop's first career step was to become an assistant lecturer at the Medical School's Department of Pathology in 1950, where she stayed until 1953. She recalled living as a group in the house surgeon's quarters was “great fun…working long hours and letting off steam in the remainder.”

But a life-changing romance was also blooming in the background. She married John Heslop in Auckland in January, 1953 and by the end of that year found herself on a cargo ship, the Port Vindex, en route to the UK (her husband was the ship’s surgeon), fulfilling a directive from her mother years earlier that she “must travel”.

The young couple settled in London where John became a surgical officer at the King Edward Memorial Hospital in Ealing while his wife landed a research job at Great Ormond Street Hospital, for sick children, which had been organised for her by Charles Hercus in Dunedin.

At the end of 1956 the Heslops returned to New Zealand, this time with 10-day-old baby daughter Helen in hand, as John had been appointed a senior register and surgical tutor at Dunedin Hospital. Being a young mother could have spelled the end of Dr Heslop’s academic career, but although she made no immediate plans to return to work, it wasn’t long before her medical credentials were in demand again.

“While I was still in Auckland, ‘JH’ rang up one day and said that the pathology department (in Dunedin) was asking where I was. So he told them that I’d work part time and that ‘Grandma’ (John’s mother) would look after Helen. I don’t know what I would have done had she not been prepared to do this. It was unusual at the time—society was not geared for working mothers. Indeed, it looked upon them askance.”

Dr Heslop returned as a lecturer but, the following year, she became a senior research officer in the department of surgery, working with the transplantation research group alongside orthopaedics professor Norman Nisbet. “It was the early days of transplantation, and it all felt a bit more intellectually alive,” she wrote. “It was necessary to learn a lot of new stuff, and it was nice to think about Mendelian genetics again.”

During this time Mrs Heslop worked on what would be her major contributions to immunology, notably her research on how to prolong organ graft survival. Eventually she rose to become head of the research group, holding the position until 1990. In that time she published more than 130 research papers and because of her special interest in transplantation and immunology, was often invited to lecture and teach overseas.

In 1972 she was made an associate professor, at that time believed to be the first woman in New Zealand to achieve this status in a department of surgery. More honours were to follow, in fact, there was a veritable flood of them. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1975, for her contribution to surgical science, and, in March 1984, became a professor of surgery at the Otago Medical School, the first medically-qualified woman to do so.

In 1978 Dr Heslop became the convenor of the Dunedin Basic Medical Sciences Course Trust, following the retirement of Assoc Prof John Borrie. “At its height we were running two courses a year for a total of about 130-odd students, most from Australia,” she wrote. “It made a significant profit—enough to donate $300,000 to the
neurosurgery appeal in 2012, without impairing its capacity to issue its smallish annual scholarships.”

In the summer of 1989–90 there was a “double banger” of awards bestowed upon Dr Heslop, learning, on the same day, she was to be made a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand and also to be awarded a CBE in the New Year’s honours list. Five years later her husband was given the same honour, a “rare double” indeed for the same household.

Not that it was unusual for them to have shared interests. Both she and her husband were also heavily involved with the Cancer Society (both becoming life members in the 1990s). At the time of Dr Heslop’s honour (1997) the Society’s medical director, Dr Peter Dady, described her to the *ODT* as “a powerful advocate for research who gave the committee some profound insights into the strange Machiavellian workings of New Zealand universities.”

Officially Dr Heslop “retired” in 1989 but, as mentioned earlier, she found retirement a difficult status to achieve, such was the ongoing demand for her services and for access to her formidable intellect and vast reservoir of knowledge.

In August, 2004, she put those qualities into a 15-page paper, published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal*, entitled *All About Research—looking back at the 1987 Cervical Cancer Inquiry* in which she examined the controversial work of Dr Herbert Green and the subsequent Cartwright Inquiry.

Her family says she also enjoyed writing non-fiction entries for the Manhire Prize and got shortlisted three or four times, her favourite being Eomaia’s Children, a 2008 work about rats, the laboratory animal she worked with. It is an incredibly detailed story, accompanied with a bibliography of 25 references.

On the rare occasions when she wasn’t writing, Dr Heslop loved her music—she was an accomplished pianist—cooking, and spoiling her dogs Sam and Henry.

In a more recent development, Dr Heslop now has her own Wikipedia page, which was mentioned in last week’s Guardian newspaper in a story titled “Don’t just use women in science—listen to them too.” Dr Heslop’s family say such publicity, about the under-representation of women scientists in Wikipedia, would have amused her.

When Dr Heslop knew her death was imminent, her attention to detail continued, leaving clear instructions there was to be no funeral, rather a private cremation. But she also wanted her family, old friends and colleagues, to enjoy a get-together in Dunedin last month where the life of a truly remarkable woman was celebrated—and a fine time was had by all.

Dr Heslop is survived by her husband John and daughters Helen and Hilary.

Dave Cannan of the *Otago Daily Times* ([http://www.odt.co.nz](http://www.odt.co.nz)) wrote this obituary. We thank them for the reprint permission.

Wikipedia webpage, including link to 2004 *NZMJ* article: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Farnsworth_Heslop](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Farnsworth_Heslop)