



**Office of Hon Pete Hodgson**  
**MP for Dunedin North**

Minister for Economic Development  
Minister for Tertiary Education  
Minister of Research, Science and Technology

28 OCT 2008

Distinguished Professor David Penny CNZM  
Allan Wilson Centre for Molecular Ecology and Evolution  
Massey University  
**PALMERSTON NORTH**

Dear David

**70th Birthday Celebration and Symposium**

It is with regret that I am unable to attend the celebration of your research career in your 70<sup>th</sup> year. I am sure that you will understand that I have other pressing engagements that I must attend to this weekend.

Congratulations on reaching your 70<sup>th</sup> year and also remaining an astonishingly active and productive researcher!

You are one of our most visionary and influential scientists, justifiably recognised by the Royal Society of New Zealand and the New Zealand Association of Scientists with their highest honours, and by the government when it made you a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2006 for your services to science.

Over 40 years ago, with your long time collaborator Distinguished Professor Mike Hendy, you saw how information from DNA was going to revolutionise biology and that what was needed were reliable methods to analyse this information. You realised that cooperation between biologists and mathematicians was required. Not an easy task back then – when the perception probably was, and still is, “Mathematicians are from Mars, and Biologists are from Venus”.

You and Mike quickly made your mark on the international research community with influential early papers on DNA sequence analysis. In these you reminded researchers that mathematical models need to encapsulate biological realities and that there needs to be a way to rigorously assess confidence in the results derived from such models. Those reminders are as valid now as 40 years ago, and not just for genetics.

You have been a prolific researcher and scientific collaborator, publishing papers with over 140 colleagues; among them some of the world’s leading mathematicians and biologists. Several of your papers have been cited hundreds of times.

Mike, with you have built up a large and influential research group, culminating in the establishment of the Allan Wilson Centre for Molecular Ecology and Evolution, one of our Centres of Research Excellence. These Centres have been called the jewels in New Zealand's research crown, and competition to become such a Centre has been intense.

While New Zealand presents many interesting evolutionary examples, it is some of the work that you have been involved in that has made New Zealand such an influential place for evolutionary biology.

Your interests range widely, covering ancient and recent evolutionary events, complex mathematics, the history and philosophy of science, the ethical treatment of great apes, and, so I'm told, single malt whiskies of Scotland. You have also been a passionate advocate for science and science education in New Zealand.

There is no denying your intellect and restless curiosity. However, one thing that does seem to shake your colleagues' and students' trust and confidence in you is when you threaten to do an actual lab experiment. Thankfully, you don't appear to have followed through on this threat for many decades.

More importantly than the number of papers or your citation statistics is your legacy as a teacher and mentor of students and young researchers. Many have established successful research careers in various parts of the world, reinforcing your and New Zealand's influence on evolutionary biology. I know that many wished that they could have been able to come to the symposium to celebrate your life as a scientist and as a teacher.

While you are known not to gladly suffer scientific or bureaucratic fools you have devoted considerable time to and interest in the welfare of your students. Consequently, many regard you more as a friend or colleague rather than as a supervisor. That is a most enviable and satisfying achievement.

This, of course, is not the end of your research career so I wish you many more stimulating and productive years.

Best wishes



Pete Hodgson  
**Minister of Research, Science and  
Technology**