



SEEKING REFUGE: A boat load of would-be refugees stretches out on Princes Wharf, awaiting processing by officials in a Customs exercise.

PHOTOS: ZELDA MACKENZIE

Ig Nobel prize for exploding trousers

by Jonathan Williams

Research on how a farming breakthrough led to a spate of exploding pants has earned international recognition.

Massey University lecturer Dr James Watson won the Ig Nobel Prize in Agricultural History for his work entitled "The Significance of Richard Buckley's Exploding Trousers: Reflections on an Aspect of Technological Change in New Zealand Dairy Farming between the World Wars."

Watson says the award came as something of a shock.

"I didn't really know what was going on when I got the email about it – I didn't apply or anything," he says.

The Ig Nobel Prizes are run with the tagline: "The winners have all done things that first make people laugh, then make them think."

They are awarded by an organisation called the Annals of Improbable Research.

The Annals is a group of academics who think academia is taken too seriously, so try to seek out research that is off the wall. They also want to challenge people's perceptions of what is legitimate research.

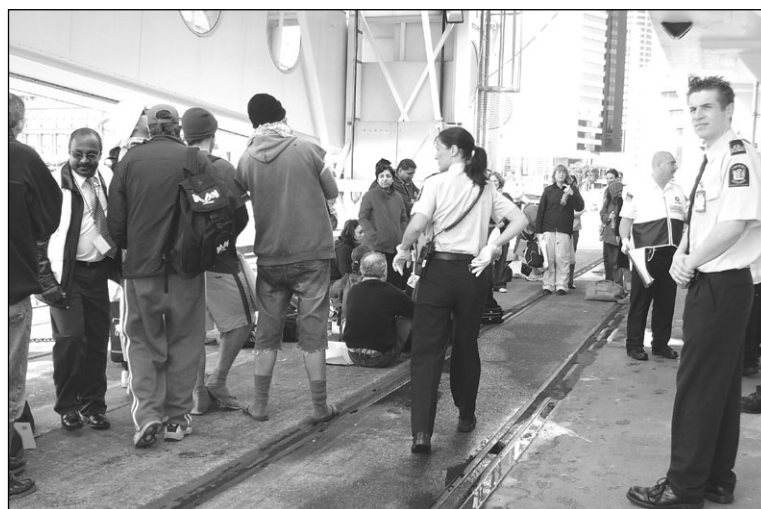
Watson thinks the awards are important in changing popular attitudes to academia.

"There is a perception that subjects like science and history are quite dry. These awards can show people there is a lighter side to those subjects, but the research is still useful," he says.

The awards cover categories as varied as physics, nutrition and agricultural history.

Past winners include a Japanese scientist who recorded and analysed every meal he ate over a period of 34 years, and an alarm clock that runs away and hides when it goes off.

PHOTOS: JENNY JUNO



'Calchois refugees' test our borders

by Emma Page

Princes Wharf was transformed into a refugee processing centre last Wednesday when a boat load of illegal migrants from Calchois landed in Auckland.

If this is the first time you've heard about it, don't worry. The whole episode was an exercise designed to test the responses of government departments in preparation for a similar real life scenario. And no, Calchois is not a real country.

Zelda MacKenzie, communications manager at New Zealand Customs Services, says the aim of the exercise was to assess the "interoperability" of all the agencies involved.

"It's very important that although we all have our individual bits to do, we are all able to work together to achieve the overall goals of government."

Seventy role players acted out various scenarios throughout

the day, including a woman who went into labour and an escape attempt. The 130 staff from five government departments were not briefed on these scenarios and had to respond to them as if they were the real thing.

Paul Smith, manager of the risk response group at Customs, says he was pleased with the exercise and that they achieved all their objectives.

"I think it's extremely important to provide opportunities for agencies to actually walk through planning and managing events."

"Exercise Barrier" was run by the New Zealand Customs Service in conjunction with the New Zealand Defence Force, the Department of Labour, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries along with New Zealand Maritime, St John and Ports of Auckland.

Additional reporting by Fiona Peat.

Health project targets Pacific diabetes

by Kate Fisher

The Ministry of Health has put up funding for a national initiative to fight diabetes in Pacific communities, led by a steering group of nationwide health organisations and professionals.

Josephine Samuelu, project manager of the National Pacific Diabetes Initiative, says with the national project will come a change in how the Pacific community has viewed health.

The project aims to provide tools for health professionals by taking a holistic approach involving whole families and communities.

Pacific communities have high rates of type-2 diabetes, mainly caused by poor diet and being overweight.

Figures from 1996-2000 show the avoidable mortality rates of diabetes in New Zealand's Pacific population to be 604 in

100,000. But over the total population it is 397 in 100,000, according to a 2004 NZ Health Information Service study.

The group will meet bi-monthly to review project reports and progress, and set new targets.

Samuelu says the resources to be developed are still being discussed. A health directory is planned, pooling information from contributing health organisations.

Doctors, nurses, community health workers and district health boards will all have access to the same directory — a collation of materials on diabetes and nutrition used by each area, so all practitioners are reinforcing the same messages in treating their patients.

"It will mean all health practi-

tioners will be on the same page," says Samuelu.

Dietician on the steering group Karen Fukofuka says there is occasionally a lack of understanding of nutrition principles among health staff which adds to confusion and misinformation in the community.

"It's great developing materials but if information is not developed or used properly, it won't be effective," she says.

"In some cases the basics of diabetes still haven't been understood by the patient even though they have been taking medication for a long time."

Fukofuka is developing lifestyle guides for patients and health professionals.

She says the main dietary issues causing diabetes in

Pacific people are oversized portions, an unbalanced diet, and not enough exercise.

"If you are overweight it affects the body's sensitivity to insulin, and diabetics are at greater risk of cardiovascular disease," she says.

Fukofuka hopes the resources will be used in the Pacific Islands, maintaining consistency in the information given and supporting people's home Pacific communities.

Samuelu says Pacific people put others, including the church, before themselves, so their own health is the last thing they attend to. By that time could be too late and there could be complications, she says.

"It's a matter of understanding the Pacific mindset. If they don't see anything wrong on the outside, it means everything is okay," she says.

Samuelu says the steering group will also look at how to

address the shortfall in training programmes.

As well as a lack of Pacific health specialists and those who understand Pacific cultures, there is a shortage of health professionals who are diabetes specialists, says Samuelu.

This is caused by a lack of programmes and postgraduate courses in this area, she says.

"Training content needs to be specifically relevant to Pacific healthcare and for diabetes specific training, nurses have to go overseas," she says.

Counties Manukau District Health Board offers cultural training to staff, and under the Health Practitioners Act, nurses are required to undergo a cultural competency unit as part of their training.

But Samuelu says it is not enough.

"Messages delivered by Pacific to Pacific are far more effective."

"In some cases the basics of diabetes still haven't been understood by the patient."