

# Alistair Gunn

15 December 1958–10 May 2026



**T**he University of Auckland professor and paediatric endocrinologist Alistair Gunn, who developed a treatment that saved the lives of many babies worldwide, has died at the age of 67.

Alistair completed his medical degree at the University of Otago in December 1982 and went on to train in paediatric endocrinology. From an early stage his research interests were clear; he completed a PhD with Sir Peter Gluckman in 1992, while working as a registrar, and was a senior research fellow at The University of Auckland in 1997 before being appointed as a paediatric endocrinologist at the Starship Children's Hospital in 1999.

Alistair was a pre-eminent leader in foetal and neonatal perinatal neuroscience, focussing

on babies' brain development from conception through their early days. He was the co-director of The University of Auckland's Foetal Physiology and Neuroscience Group.

His pre-clinical and clinical studies led to the optimisation and implementation of therapeutic hypothermia—brain cooling for newborn babies who suffer from oxygen deprivation at birth. The treatment involves chilling the brain for 72 hours after birth. This reduces the amount of oxygen the baby's brain needs, thereby potentially preventing further damage. It remains the only standard international clinical therapy designed to reduce brain injury and improve infant survival, and has saved countless lives and enabled millions of babies to thrive in this world without disability.

Alistair's research and clinical successes were

recognised by many awards and prizes. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 2009, and received the MacDiarmid Medal in 2014 and the Health Research Council's Beaven Medal in 2017. He jointly received the New Zealand Association of Scientists' Shorland Medal in 2017, with colleagues Professor Laura Bennet, Associate Professors Joanne Davidson and Justin Dean and Professor Colin Green. In 2024, he was awarded the Royal Australasian College of Physicians Howard Williams Medal and was made an honorary fellow of the United States of America-based Newborn Brain Society for his outstanding contributions to our understanding and practice of neuroprotection of the newborn.

Alistair was a cherished colleague, friend and

mentor. His colleagues remember him as curious, kind-hearted and generous in sharing his skills and knowledge. Many remember him occasionally walking down the corridors, a draft research paper in one hand, and a team member's baby in the other, soothing their crying. He loved babies and they loved him, or at least his beard.

Colleagues around the world have sent messages of condolence and they all say the same thing: Alistair was a clever, kind man with a unique sense of humour. His scientific insight, openness and commitment to perinatal brain research and mentoring was an inspiration.

Alistair is survived by his wife Diana, his four children Eleanor, Jeff, Kitty and Isabel and his grandchildren Josephine, Lawrence, Are and Kea.

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**AUTHOR INFORMATION**

This obituary was written by Dr Janak de Zoysa and Professor Laura Bennet, The University of Auckland.

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