

2021 NZIMLS top student award recipient: Natalie Heath



The Top Student Award is offered annually by the NZIMLS for student academic achievement during the third year of the BMLSc degree or in more recent times during the fourth year. The award is made to students at the University of Otago and AUT in New Zealand who offer the BMLSc qualification, and is provided in support of the recipient's final clinical training year in the BMLSc programme. The value is \$2,000.00, usually paid to the University, and they present to the winner on behalf of NZIMLS.

In November, AUT recognised Natalie Heath, a fourth year student as their well-deserved recipient for the year 2021 and I reached out to Natalie to find out a little more about her journey so far.

Lisa. Natalie, Firstly congratulations on winning the top student award! What a fantastic accolade to start your career in medical laboratory science. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

Lisa. Can you tell us a little about yourself?

Natalie. I have wanted to be a scientist ever since I was little. I was a morbid child and was particularly fascinated by diseases. When it came time to think about university, I didn't know what exactly I wanted to do. My plan was to do a biomedical science degree and take it from there, but once I discovered BMLSc, my mind was completely set.

Lisa. What interested you about the BMLSc degree?

Natalie. The first thing about BMLSc that caught my attention was how quickly you dive into doing relatively specialised topics. I knew I wanted to be involved in medical science and pathology somehow, so I appreciated that in the scheme of things, you don't spend a long time doing general science papers before focusing on laboratory science. Despite medical laboratory science being a decently specific area of expertise, there is a lot of variety between topics. Before I started studying, I didn't even know what some of the topics were.

Lisa. What did the programme entail? Was there a speciality or a particular placement that really grabbed you?

Natalie. The principle of the BMLSc degree, is to learn the basics of each specialty within medical laboratory science before choosing your path, this gives you the ability to really see if the specialisation suits you before choosing to pursue it. The programme is fast paced; each course having lectures and labs leads to a sizeable workload. There were aspects of every course that I enjoyed, and I honestly struggled to choose my specialties. I particularly enjoyed the detective work involved in medical microbiology, and I loved looking at blood films in haematology. In the end, I specialised in clinical chemistry and transfusion science. I loved case studies in clinical chemistry, as well as the unexpected intricacies in transfusion science, particularly antibody identification.

Lisa. Top Student, What does this prize mean for you?

Natalie. It means a lot to me. It's unbelievable. I honestly have no idea what to say, I've always prided myself on being a hard worker before anything else, and something like this just seems completely unreal.

Lisa. What's next for you in your career?

Natalie. In December I started working in the Blood Transfusion Department at Whangarei Hospital. After four years of study, it's very gratifying to finally be "out there" in workplace, and I'm really enjoying it so far. I have a lot to learn, but luckily it's a wonderful team. Further down the line, I'm definitely considering further study and I'd love to write articles, or pending a considerable improvement in my public speaking ability, give presentations. My lifelong career goal is to be able to emulate the scientists who have inspired me.

Lisa. What do you enjoy about the job and what has your experience in the laboratory taught you?

Natalie. I love everything about the job! Blood Transfusion is unique since you're providing products to patients, not solely reporting results. It allows you to be part of the whole picture of a patient's treatment in a way that other specialisations didn't offer. If I have learnt anything so far, it's the importance of working as a team, not just with your colleagues, but with everyone involved in patient care. For Blood Transfusion in Northland, that means thinking of the people at component processing in Auckland who send us our orders of red cell components, as well as the doctors and nurses at the patient bedside, when making decisions. If we all make the effort to make things easier for one another, everyone benefits – especially the patients.

Lisa. These two years of the Covid-19 pandemic have increased the profile of the Medical Laboratory Scientist, in New Zealand, how do you think this has impacted the profession, your career and you personally?

Natalie. The Covid-19 pandemic has been an interesting time to be entering medical laboratory science. The profession has been thrust into the public eye in a way it hasn't been before, which has introduced a lot of pressure. Test results are expected the next day, there is less tolerance for false positives or false negatives, and there is more scrutiny than ever before between different types of testing. The distinction between PCR results and rapid antigen tests comes to mind. I didn't lose too much of my placement to alert level changes, although I know several people who weren't so lucky. Personally, the pandemic reminded me of how important this field is.

Lisa. Do you have any advice for our up-and-coming medical laboratory scientists?

Natalie. Choosing your specialisation should not deter you from getting as much value as possible out of each individual field. Haematology is indispensable to transfusion science, as is immunology to microbiology. It's such an interesting world, and you'd be doing yourself a disservice to limit your borders.

Lisa. Thank you Natalie, your energy is infectious!

On behalf of the NZIMLS and its members we wish you all the best in your career. I have no doubt that we will be hearing from you in the future as an author in the Journal and as a presenter at NZIMLS events.

Lisa Cambridge
Deputy Editor