

# A Canterbury tale: this is your life, *Don Beaven*

✉ Elizabeth Home

*Some people have ideas; others seem driven to put them into effect. In Christchurch, New Zealand, over the last 50 years, Don Beaven has pioneered diabetes associations, diabetes centres, diabetes promotion, and diabetes guidelines, not to mention wine and olive growing. The local diabetes association, Diabetes Christchurch, recently held a 'This is Your Life' celebration of his activities and successes – Elizabeth Home reports.*

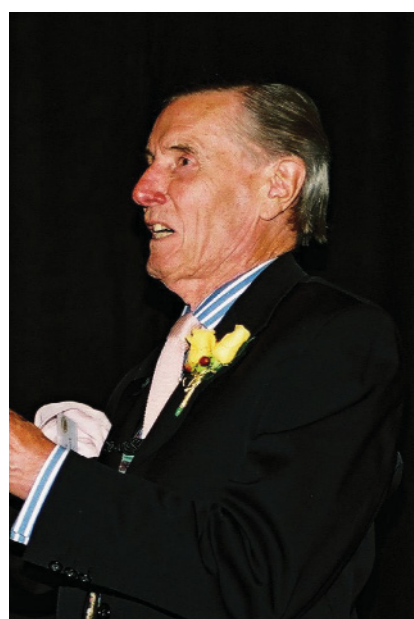


Students of English literature will know that Geoffrey Chaucer, in his 'Canterbury Tales' of 1387, vividly portrayed a group of people drawn from all walks of life who entertained each other on their journey from London to Canterbury by telling stories. In those days, the 60 miles (95 km) took three to four days.

In 1955 a young doctor, Don Beaven, made a journey halfway round the globe, from London, England to his home in Canterbury, a region of South Island, New Zealand. He had just completed specialist training in diabetes in the UK, and returned to the city of

Christchurch brimming with ideas and the will to put these into action. Within a year, he had helped to set up the Christchurch Diabetes Association, drawing on the aims and objectives of the British Diabetic Association. Previous attempts had met with resistance from the local Medical Association who were afraid that it would be too depressing for people with diabetes to get together.

Since its inauguration in 1956 with 43 members, the Association has grown to be the 1200-member 'Diabetes Christchurch', one of 37 local societies federated to the national association Diabetes New Zealand (founded in 1962 and now involving 210 000 families).



## **A Gandalf of diabetes?**

Don's stay in London had coincided with the first publication of J R R Tolkien's book trilogy 'The Lord of the Rings'. Professor Tolkien was an English tale-teller (as he described himself) whose day job happened to involve studying and teaching English literature of the Anglo-Saxon period, several centuries before Chaucer. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that two special events should coincide during the last week of February 2004.

In the USA, a film version of Tolkien's creation, which has brought the glorious landscapes of South Island New Zealand to cinema screens worldwide, received the accolades of the film industry in the Oscars ceremony. In New Zealand itself, Diabetes Christchurch used the occasion of its annual dinner (and fundraising auction) to pay tribute to Professor Don Beaven. A local mayor (and former television presenter) played host to the "This Is Your Life" event. People drawn (by diabetes) from all walks of life came together to tell tales of Don's groundbreaking contributions to diabetes care, and it made a fascinating story.

The evolution of Diabetes Christchurch presents just one example of how Don encouraged people to work together as a team in order to achieve their aims. In 1967, relationships between lay and professional members were cemented by their collaboration in the landmark Rangiora Survey to determine the prevalence of diabetes in that population. They even made a film about it.

Don's groundbreaking contributions to diabetes care make a fascinating story.

Don had initiated metabolic studies of people in ketoacidosis on his return to Christchurch in 1955, and subsequently spent two years as a research fellow in the USA, at Harvard. Following this, he expanded research activities in Christchurch, becoming a founder member of the Canterbury Medical Research Foundation in 1960, and attracting a long succession of research fellows in his turn.



### A diabetes centre in the Arts Centre

In the 1970s, ideas about the need for education to allow people with diabetes to develop self-sufficiency led to the opening in 1978 of the Christchurch Diabetes Centre. Rooms which became available in the local Arts Centre were snapped up and the first year's rent was guaranteed by the Christchurch Diabetes Association in what was described as "an act of faith". The introduction of a nurse educator had to overcome all sorts of barriers, not least the resistance to the idea of a nurse who was not in uniform.

The involvement of the Association at all stages in the development of the Diabetes Centre soon led to the use of people with diabetes to teach health professionals how it felt to have diabetes. The Centre was also used for

building bridges to primary health care. Early concerns of primary health-care doctors that the Centre would undermine their care delivery were soon overcome, and indeed reversed as they rapidly came to make use of its novel resources. Don insisted that accurate records were kept and that new health-care initiatives were carefully evaluated for effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and modified as necessary in the light of this evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

### New Zealand diabetes guidelines

In 1988, the year before he retired from the Christchurch Medical School, Don saw the launch by the New Zealand Minister of Health of the first diabetes guidelines. Don chaired the working group, and has been able to follow subsequent developments, most recently the joint launch in December >>



2003 of national guidelines for the management of Type 2 diabetes, for the assessment and management of cardiovascular risk, and for life after a stroke.<sup>2</sup>

In 1994, a New Zealand Declaration (based on the St Vincent Declaration) was presented to the government and finally gained endorsement in 'Strategies for the Prevention and Control of Diabetes in New Zealand' in 1998.<sup>3</sup> Also in the 1990s, it became clear that Maori and Pacific Island populations within New Zealand were disproportionately affected by diabetes, reflecting experience elsewhere in the Pacific. Don was instrumental in obtaining resources to employ a Maori diabetes fieldworker and a Pacific Island diabetes nurse, who was able to address the lifestyle issues in a culturally sensitive manner.

### **IDF, wine, olives ... and Barnaby Bee**

It is clear from all this that Don has drawn heavily on his international contacts and indeed he is proud to be IDF Member No. 112, and to have been actively involved in IDF

Chaucer and Tolkien created some amazing characters, but nothing quite like Barnaby Bee, created to spread the message 'Bee Aware'.

congresses for many years. It would seem that if there is an idea floating anywhere in the diabetes world, Don has been among the first not only to grasp it but also to run with it.

Don is now introducing olive-growing to Canterbury.

Pretending to be retired, and not content with helping to establish the wine industry in New Zealand, Don is examining all aspects of the Mediterranean diet and is now introducing olive-growing to Canterbury. True to form, Don does not just sit under the tree waiting for the fruit to drop. He pursues the subject with rigour, and publishes on it. That takes him back long before the English literature of Chaucer, back even before Homer. If Don's olive trees take root anything like as well as his initiatives in diabetes care, olive-growing is assured of a great future in New Zealand.

There is not space to name all of those who contributed, as tale-tellers or audience, to 'This Is Your Life, Don Beaven', but Don had clearly

contributed hugely to all their lives by recognizing and harnessing their various individual skills in the cause of better diabetes care. A standing ovation said it all, and the local newspapers were full of it.

Chaucer and Tolkien created some amazing characters in their time, but nothing quite like Barnaby Bee, the brilliantly coloured soft toy created by Diabetes Christchurch to spread the message 'Bee Aware'. He is just strange enough (and squeaky enough) to attract attention (and hence conversations about diabetes) wherever he goes, on the streets of Christchurch or further afield.

#### **Elizabeth Home**

*Elizabeth Home is a medical editor and writer, with a particular interest in diabetes.*

#### **References**

- 1 Beaven DW, Scott RS, Helm AM, Clarkson MJ, Bremer JM, Price M, et al. Regional diabetes education centres. A unique New Zealand consumer - health service project. *IDF Bull* 1983; 28: 5-11.
- 2 <http://www.nzgg.org.nz>
- 3 Ministry of Health, New Zealand. Strategies for the prevention and control of diabetes in New Zealand. 1997.