The following report is a summary of the second term of my Masters reviewing my time at Oxford, the course, my involvement with Rotary and extracurricular activities.
Hilary Term was our last together as a class in lectures and the laboratory. It has been a fascinating time to be studying in this field with the recent developments of the ‘three parent embryo’ and gene editing technology ‘CRISPR/Cas9’. While last term focused on gaining a strong scientific base, this term developed clinical knowledge and skills. We also explored ethical, legal and business elements of artificial reproductive technologies with visiting experts in the field.

As part of the assessments for this term, we handed in a 4000 word essay on an allocated topic in reproduction. This had to be printed and bound before personally submitting it to the Examination School. Then following the Easter break, we had a three hour written exam at the Examination School in the full sub fusc attire. We only had this one exam to display everything we had learnt in the course to date so the three hours passed by rapidly.

I shadowed a doctor during a clinic at the Oxford Fertility Unit and spent a day behind the scenes in the state of the art laboratory with embryologists. This was a great experience to see the running of a highly regarded fertility unit. It reinforced theory we had learnt throughout the year and I could compare and contrast what I have seen in New Zealand clinics previously. Hearing the patient’s stories and questions reinforced the reasons why I have chosen to complete this Masters and I left inspired to make a positive difference in the journey that they experience.
The special support received by the Rotary community and the incredible events they arrange have continued this term. Our first outing was at Blenheim Palace, which is a 20 minute bus ride from Oxford. This is the home of the Duke of Marlborough and the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill. Here, we were met by Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill who is sister to the current Duke of Marlborough. Her father had been involved with the Rotary Club of Woodstock during his lifetime and had started these special tours and talks with the Rotarian scholars at Oxford. We were treated to a personalised family history over morning tea in one of the private rooms of the palace. It was here we learnt that Sir Winston was only born at the palace because his mother had gone into labour prematurely while attending one of the famous hunting parties. Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill spoke with poise and humour and this was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity.

For an equally English activity, we were treated to a day at Ascot Races with the Ascot Rotary Club. With pleasure, we informed our respective courses that we were unable to attend university that day due to a very important scholarship day. We had tickets to the King Edward VII Enclosure where fascinators are preferred and smart attire mandatory. After a great day we were treated to afternoon tea at a Rotarian’s house before attending the club’s dinner that evening.

As part of the scholarship I have been speaking to clubs in Oxfordshire about the program and my area of study. I have addressed five clubs so far, which has been a great opportunity to share my passion and further develop my public speaking skills. It is particularly inspiring when I am approached by members after my talk who tell me that their grandchildren are IVF babies, their children are going through the infertility journey or that they have one of the genetic diseases that are being researched in the field. The interest in this subject is incredibly high and I am encouraged that clinical embryology is a vitally important area that will continue to grow in importance in the future.

The Oxford Scholars at Blenheim Palace and then Ascot Races in ‘spring’.
Sport

After retiring from rowing I have been in search of my next sport to play in Oxford. I recently joined the Oxford University Clay Pigeon Shooting Club for a lesson at the E.J. Churchill shooting ground. I have also joined a croquet team for the upcoming Cuppers tournament, which is the largest in the world. Last week, my college arranged a team to run in the Town and Gown 10km which is a charity event for Muscular Dystrophy. We had 93 people running in the St Hugh’s Team and raised over £2,200. It was a stunning run through the main sights of town and fell on the first warm day I have experienced in Oxford.

The St Hugh’s College Town and Gown 10km Team.

Extracurricular activities

With spring starting in May the college ball season began. I attended the St Hugh’s Ball which was a fabulous night in the gardens I have come to call home. Thinking back to when I first arrived knowing no one in Oxford, I am grateful to have made great friendships within my class, college and beyond. It was a great night to cement these friendships and enjoy St Hugh’s gardens.

It has been special celebrating Waitangi Day and ANZAC Day on the other side of the world. There is an Oxford University Australian and New Zealand Society (OUANZ) who arranged events for both days. On Waitangi Day, visiting Professor David Williams and his wife attended and spoke about the importance of Waitangi, the unique history of New Zealand and the law. We watched a TED talk by Tama Iti while sipping on New Zealand Pinot Noir. Then for ANZAC day, there was a beautiful service at the Rhodes House coinciding with the Dawn Service in New Zealand. There is a very strong bond and shared humour between kiwis and aussies in the United Kingdom and it has been great being part of this community.
St Hugh’s College Ball with a Garden of Eden theme. It was an easy walk home as I live on site.

Next steps

I now head into the third and last term, Trinity. I will conduct a research project within the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology based at the John Radcliffe Hospital. My project is looking at the genes involved in endometriosis and I will be working with world leaders in this area. This is very important research for a debilitating disease affecting up to 12% of women of reproductive age. Curiously, up to 50% of women seeking treatment in fertility clinics have this disease yet the mechanisms are poorly understood and hopefully my research will offer new insights into the pathogenesis. As this will be my last few months in Oxford I intend to exhaust the vast opportunities on offer here. As always, I am immensely grateful to Rotary and your clubs in particular for this opportunity.