

CSIRO celebrates 75 years of advancing statistics

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September 29 this year marked 75 years since the appointment of CSIRO's first statistician, Betty Allan. The anniversary was celebrated with two talks followed by a dinner at University House, ANU, Canberra. Among the guests were Betty Allan's son and grandson.

The first talk, by John Field (formerly of CSIRO, now a statistical consultant), outlined Betty's statistical career.

John explained that Frances Elizabeth 'Betty' Allan was a gifted mathematician who had studied pure and mixed mathematics at the University of Melbourne and with RA Fisher at Rothamsted Experimental Station in the UK. She was appointed on 29 September 1930 to apply statistical methods to agricultural research at the then-CSIR Division of Plant Industry, in Canberra.

Betty Allan's projects included control of oriental peach moths and blowflies, work on plant diseases and noxious weeds, and studies of the effects of supplements on sheep.

Much of her work involved helping others and supporting their research projects rather than pursuing her own research interests. After she retired in 1940 following

her marriage, CSIRO formally established a Biometrics Section, forerunner to the present-day CSIRO Mathematical and Information Sciences.

The second talk was by Terry Speed (Walter & Eliza Hall Institute and University of California, Berkeley) who spoke on aspects of statistical research in CSIRO which linked back to Betty Allan. Allan's research with John Wishart had been on the estimation of missing values in designed experiments, a topic later taken up in CSIRO by E.A. Cornish, G.N. Wilkinson, R.G. Jarrett and E.R. Williams.

Moving to molecular biology, Terry highlighted the influence of a paper by A.J. Gibbs and G.A. McIntyre (1970) who developed a precursor to the widely used "dot-plot" for sequence comparison, and a number of publications by Richard Cowan written while working with the CSIRO Division of Molecular Biology. Finally, he speculated on possible future directions for mathematics, statistics and molecular biology.

For slides and/or summaries of these talks, and to view photos of the anniversary dinner, see <http://www.cmis.csiro.au/stats75/dinner.htm>.