

# Determined campaigner

Pioneering health advocate Neil Cherry was called everything from a world-class academic to a snake-oil merchant. JOHN HENZELL recalls his life.

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On a classic clear late-autumn Canterbury day exactly a week before Neil Cherry succumbed to motor neurone disease, one of his final public acts became poignantly symbolic of the way he had lived.

The crippling disease had progressively forced Dr Cherry to abandon his role as Environment Canterbury (ECan) councillor and his other public commitments but he maintained to the end his chairmanship of the board of wind-turbine pioneers Windflow Technology.

On Saturday, May 17, years of work had culminated in the assembly of the prototype wind turbine on a site near Gebbies Pass, at the head of Lyttelton Harbour. Dr Cherry's colleagues were determined that he should be there to witness the event but the wheelchair taxi was halted by a steep stretch of track leading to the site.

Windflow Technology executive director Geoff Henderson said that while they were working out how to get Dr Cherry up the final 100m, "Neil basically motored up the hill in his wheelchair, which caught us all by surprise".

The event seemed to capture the quiet persistence that underscored Dr Cherry's life. They were there on that day because Dr Cherry's scientific credibility as an associate professor of environmental health at Lincoln University had helped the company to raise millions of dollars in investment, his stewardship had allowed it to prosper, and then he had demonstrated his personal determination to witness the culmination.

Mr Henderson recalls a very pleasant few hours as the turbine engine and blades were put in place.

"Neil enjoyed it immensely and was obviously full of congratulation for getting that far," he said.

"It was a special moment and we had a little surprise for him, too. We'd had 'Neil' written on the cover of the turbine and when we unveiled it, we said 'This is for you, Neil'."

Mr Henderson recalls it as an emotional moment with many tears shed by those who were present, especially because it was painfully obvious that Dr Cherry did not have long to live. Few suspected it would only be a week.

When Dr Cherry was diagnosed in November 2001 with motor neurone disease and realised he had only a short time to live, he made a calm and rational decision to



Neil Cherry and his wife: his life was characterised by quiet persistence.

concentrate his remaining energies on three pet topics.

Wind turbine power generation was one. The other two were getting ECAN to tackle the issue of electromagnetic radiation (EMR) — the "electronic smog" he blames for causing his fatal illness — and ensuring Canterbury would use its water resources more sustainably.

The EMR issue was typical of Dr Cherry's focus. He was not afraid to tackle the big subjects that others shied away from — and ECAN potentially faced the financial resources of the world's biggest telecommunications companies if it wanted to declare EMR as a contaminant — and he based his stance on a wealth of research.

As with the wind turbine on Gebbies Pass, his EMR stance involved poignant timing.

The 177-page report he prepared summarising the research linking radiation from cellphones, radio towers, and microwaves to health impacts like heart disease, cancer, and his own motor neurone disease resulted in ECAN voting last December to take on the contentious issue.

Dr Cherry resigned as a councillor at the same meeting because the disease meant he was no longer able to turn the pages of the report he had just completed, but he kept secret his intention to resign to ensure that the council made the decision on scientific grounds rather than emotional ones.

While Dr Cherry could no longer turn the pages, he could not help

revealing his heartfelt disappointment when comments by other councillors around the table showed that they had not bothered to turn the pages of the report and read it. However, he went ahead with his resignation, explaining that he "wants what is best for Canterbury and not to allow my disability affect the ability of this council".

His EMR stance is probably the most controversial one he has taken and it was one he has espoused long before the diagnosis of his own motor neurone disease. In 1997, his views that the Australian Government was neglecting its public-health duty by failing to deal with EMR from cellphones and communications towers saw him attacked in the Australian senate.

Senator Richard Alston slammed Dr Cherry as "a charlatan" and a "snake-oil merchant".

Dr Cherry also incurred the wrath of critics for his view that the only way Christchurch could solve its chronic winter smog problems was by banning all solid fuel heating in Christchurch. He later moderated his comments but retained his firm belief that people like logburner supporters like Christchurch Mayor Garry Moore and inventor Paul Sintes were not supported by science.

At the end, although many would disagree with his conclusions, Dr Cherry's legacy is of a tireless and fearless campaigner for what he thought was right and just, regardless of how unpopular or unfashionable it might seem to others.

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