



'Super nose' co-inventor wins science award

Paul Gorman

The Canterbury co-inventor of breakthrough technology that recognises tiny amounts of dangerous substances has received one of the country's top science awards from the Royal Society of New Zealand.

Professor Murray McEwan, of the University of Canterbury's chemistry department, was awarded the Pickering Medal at last night's Royal Society awards dinner for innovation in the practical application of technology.

McEwan's initial work on detecting molecules in interstellar gas clouds has been applied to the medical, environmental and biosecurity fields in the form of a "super nose" device, now manufactured and sold by Christchurch company Syft Technologies.

The electronic nose can recognise substances in amounts of less than one part per billion and can be used in gas and oil exploration, to stop terrorist attacks by detecting lethal chemical substances and for diagnosing various illnesses, such as cancer and diabetes, by breath-testing.

Syft has opened an office in Britain and has distributors throughout Europe.

Another Canterbury University

academic, Associate Professor Lianne Woodward, of the psychology department, received the Health Research Council's Liley Medal for work on how neo-natal imaging can improve the health of premature babies.

The country's top science award, the Rutherford Medal, went to Professor Ted Baker, of Auckland University, for exceptional contributions to New Zealand science and society from research in biotechnology.

Broadcaster Kim Hill was elected a companion of the Royal Society for her coverage of science.

Royal Society chief executive Dr Steve Thompson said the awards recognised "a new breed of heroes".

"These are people who spend their lives searching for the new knowledge that expands our intellectual horizons, gives us technologies as yet unthought of and, ultimately, helps humanity to better understand itself," he said.

Thompson said the event in Auckland was the country's first "carbon-neutral awards dinner", with carbon emissions from travel, the venue and catering offset by buying credits through Landcare Research's CarboNZero programme.