

Vale Mark Colvin

Journalist, presenter of ABC radio PM programme, writer, twitterer, patient and friend, Mark Colvin passed away on May 11th after a long battle with chronic illness. Over a career of more than 40 years he covered major stories including the American Hostage Crisis in Iran, the end of the Soviet Union, the Ethiopian famine (for which he won a gold medal at the New York Film Festival), Italian organised crime and its relationship with the Italian government and reported on the Rwandan genocide having witnessed the terrible human tragedy that occurred there in 1994. All these are detailed in his memoirs 'Light and Shadows: the story of a Spy's Son' published in 2016 (an excellent read about MI6 too).

His medical story has been in the public domain recently with the publication of those memoirs, on Conversations with Richard Fidler and in the Belvoir Theatre production of the play 'Mark Colvin's Kidney' which opened in March 2017.

Mark contracted Wegener's Granulomatosis following an infection acquired in Rwanda whilst covering that 1994 genocide. He was very ill and was evacuated to London's Charing Cross Hospital where he underwent treatment with pulse methylpred (standard therapy at the time). He had both pulmonary and renal involvement. Unfortunately, he developed avascular necrosis in both hips and went on to have them replaced.

I met Mark about 20 years ago when he returned to Australia to take on the role of presenter of ABC radio's PM programme. I received a phone call from Norman Swan (presenter of the Health Report) asking if I would see Mark urgently. He was relapsing and required treatment. Remarkably, he agreed to participate in a trial of new therapies for Systemic Vasculitis, but only with partial success. Eventually, after hearing a presentation from Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, UK at the ASN on 5 cases of Vasculitis responding to rituximab, permission was sought and given from the hospital to provide this for Mark. It was an immediate success and led to long term control of the disease, but with significant renal damage already established he eventually went on to dialysis.

He spent about 3 years on dialysis but continued his work as a journalist and presenter of PM. He found dialysis time very boring and so began an expansion of his twitter career, eventually accumulating over 100,000 followers. He produced almost daily news commentary and even tweeted his own passing posthumously: "It's all been bloody marvellous".

It was whilst investigating the UK's phone hacking scandal, that he interviewed Mary-Ellen Field. She was a business advisor to model Elle McPherson and was wrongly accused of supplying confidential information to journalists and suffered both financially and personally from that scandal. Mark and Mary-Ellen became friends through that scandal and after hearing his story she offered herself as a live donor. The transplant went ahead in 2013, was filmed for ABC television and was an excellent presentation promoting live donation. The transplant was an immediate success and continued until his death from an aggressive lung cancer.

I have always believed that it is our patients who define us as renal clinicians. We are privileged to have their long-term care, getting to know them and their families personally and responding to their needs. Their input into the services we provide helps mould the clinical service. Mark paid us back double at Prince of Wales Nephrology. He became a patient representative on many committees, supported our fund raising for research and was on the organising committee for the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the first kidney transplant in NSW at Prince Henry Hospital in 1965.

It is not just journalism that is worse for his departing but also, we clinicians at Prince of Wales Nephrology. He was friend and patient to many of us from Director to ward clerk, always with a friendly greeting and very appreciative of all that was provided in his care. He is survived by his mother, sister and two sons.

There is an ABC memorial service on 5 June, which will be broadcast live or on podcast.

So, Mark,

“Farewell, and forever, farewell”

Bruce Pussell