

OBITUARY

Stem cell community loses a treasured friend

Joe Sornberger



The stem cell community is mourning the loss of one of its most cherished champions, Andrew David Lyall.

Mr. Lyall – Drew to all who knew him – was the inaugural executive director of the Stem Cell Network and, over 12 years, helped build it into an internationally respected research and development powerhouse. He died at the Élisabeth Bruyère Hospital in Ottawa on Saturday a few days shy of his 50th birthday after an eight-year battle with melanoma.

“He did more than anyone who wasn’t a scientist to advance the field of stem cells in Canada,” said James Price, President and CEO of the Canadian Stem Cell Foundation, where Mr. Lyall previously served as a director. “He emulated the spirit of collaboration that can be traced back to James Till and Ernest McCulloch and that has been vital to the field’s success over the past 15 years.”

Dr. Till, the surviving partner of the research duo that proved the

existence of stem cells more than 50 years ago, credited Mr. Lyall with persuading stem cell scientists across Canada to integrate their efforts. “Drew played a crucial role in the success of the Network, which built an extraordinary community of researchers and scholars. It also played an important role in the establishment of several other innovative initiatives, such as the Canadian Stem Cell Foundation. The impact will be felt for years to come.”

While dealing with his own imminent death, Mr. Lyall remained a model of calm dignity. He kept friends up to date via a lively and often funny private blog. When his treatment shifted from therapeutic to palliative care he was realistic but unfailingly upbeat. He posted that he had “enjoyed a life to be very grateful for” and encouraged friends to write letters to their own

children, as he had done, telling them “what you value about them, the good times you have had, and things you wished you had done together.” An organizer to the end, he used his time in the hospice to create a namesake fund at the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation.

Dr. Connie Eaves, a leading stem cell scientist who helped put the Stem Cell Network together, recalled how Mr. Lyall made an indelible impression during his job interview.

“Ron Worton (the Network’s founding Scientific Director) briefed me about Drew just before we were to interview him - me by teleconference - for the top position in the admin group. Drew’s intelligence and thoughtfulness, combined with that irresistible enthusiasm for working in the discovery arena with not too many rules, were captivating. We were so lucky he

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came on board. The world has lost a very special and good person.”

Mr. Lyall’s influence was felt well beyond Canada’s borders. A founder of the International Consortium of Stem Cell Networks, he worked closely with colleagues around the world, urging them to pool their talents in the service of finding cures and saving lives.

“It was his unique leadership style that allowed all of these different countries to come together and share a joint perspective of what was possible,” said Nancy Witty, CEO of the International Society for Stem Cell Research. “There were few people who could bring his special personality to making all of us friends and colleagues that care about one another.”

That style might best be described as disarmingly casual, relaxed bordering on rumpled. He could step up to a conference podium unfazed that his shirttail was untucked and enthrall an audience with an engaging presentation delivered in a butterscotch brogue that had lost none of its flavour since he relocated to Canada from Scotland in late 1992.

“He was unbelievably intelligent, but you didn’t necessarily realize it right away because he was not the pressed, corporate type,” said Shannon Sethuram, who worked closely with Mr. Lyall at the Stem Cell Network for five years and more

recently at BioCanRx, another federally funded research network. “There was something very casual about him that spoke to his confidence in who he was. He was, bar none, the best person I have ever worked with.”

Mr. Lyall was born on Jan. 21, 1966 in Edinburgh. He was the son of David Lyall, a Presbyterian minister, and Margaret Lyall and a brother to Catherine Slatter. He studied politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford but was an accountant by profession. He relocated to Canada to be closer to Suzanne Loch, an Ottawa school teacher he had met while travelling. They married in 1993 and have two children Heather, 15, and Matthew, 12.

“Drew was just passing through Canada when he met Suzanne on a train, and, being totally and understandably charmed, he decided to extend his stay,” said Patrick Lafferty, a mentor to Drew when he came to work at the Ottawa office of Coopers & Lybrand (which later became Pricewaterhouse Coopers - PwC). “Our United Kingdom firm had an enviable model of hiring the best and brightest liberal arts graduates from their leading universities and then teaching them accounting and auditing. Drew would happily accept any challenge as an opportunity, begin thinking it through, come back a few days later, challenge some of the assumptions, and then offer some real insights on how to best pull it off.”

Mr. Lafferty admired Mr. Lyall’s zest for life. “From the beginning, he threw himself into his first baseball game, his first hockey game, every office party, charity fundraising and sporting event, and of course, into his delightful wedding to Suzanne.”

Though not particularly athletic – he played recreational soccer and took skating lessons – Mr. Lyall was an avid sports fan who faithfully followed long-suffering Hibernian FC of North Edinburgh’s Leith. The “Hibs,” he wrote in his blog, “haven’t won the main Scottish cup for 114 years now.” He knew they were not very good, said close friend Randy McIntyre, “but he was quite proud of them.” In Canada, he quickly adopted American football, travelling to Wisconsin to see his beloved Green Bay Packers play and purchase Cheesehead hats for his children. Over the Christmas holidays, he was able to leave the hospice for a morning of watching “footie” with friends over a full English breakfast at an Ottawa pub. He tracked the ups and downs of the Ottawa Senators right up to a few days before his death.

Mr. Lyall travelled extensively, visiting more than 80 countries, but left the world regretting that he was never able to visit Machu Picchu, the Incan citadel of Peru’s Andes Mountains. A voracious reader, he Lyall, could speak as knowledgeably about the popular novels of Nick Hornby as he could debate Clayton M. Christensen’s theories on the impact of disruptive technologies on established industries.

With no science training to speak of, he quickly grasped the subtleties of the complex field he championed. A quiet but persuasive force, Mr. Lyall didn’t feel the need to be regarded as the smartest person in the room. “But he often was,” said Dr. Michael Rudnicki, the Stem Cell Network’s Scientific Director and CEO. “True leaders don’t bully their way forward. They prepare the ground. He was a builder who wanted to do great things.”

Dr. Rudnicki believes Mr. Lyall’s professional legacy is the community of stem cell scientists spread across Canada who agreed to work together collaboratively under the Network banner. “The nature of the community reflected who he was and how he dealt with people.”

Dr. Janet Rossant, President and Executive Director of the Ontario Institute for Regenerative Medicine, agreed. “Drew was a true stem cell hero,” she said. “He was the glue that brought the Network together, whether driving the science, advocating on the Hill for a cord blood stem cell bank, or leading the party at the annual Network pub night.”

Those sentiments were echoed by Prof. Tim Caulfield, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Alberta. “A master at bringing people together, Drew did much to help build Canada’s stem cell community. He always seemed to be at its centre.” And by Dr. Sam Weiss, Director of the University of Calgary’s Hotchkiss Brain Institute: “Drew was a warm and wonderful person to know, have a drink with and to share the achievements of collaboration and friendship.”

Mr. Lyall was one of the key people responsible for getting stem cell researchers to embrace the concept of commercializing their work so that it could be carried forward to clinical therapies. Dr. Michael May,

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President and CEO of the Centre for Commercialization of Regenerative Medicine said his organization, spun out of the Network, wouldn't exist without Mr. Lyall's contributions.

"Drew played a critical role in having the academic community embrace us, helping facilitate connections with the academic partners," said Dr. May. "He helped me, personally, make those founding connections within the Canadian community and abroad too. He was very generous with his time, his insights and his network."

Mr. Lyall also helped develop CellCAN, the Regenerative Medicine and Cell Therapy Network, created to accelerate progress in cell-based therapies. "Drew and the Stem Cell Network have been a driving force in uniting the centres involved in cell manufacturing and enabling the translation of findings at the bench to patients in need of novel and efficient therapies," said Dr. Denis Claude Roy, CellCAN's CEO. "Drew's trust and involvement were crucial to generate CellCAN."

Mr. Lyall, who was also an alumnus of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, left the Stem Cell Network in 2013 to become a director general with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. However, he was lured away last year when Dr. John Bell launched BioCanRx to advance anti-cancer biotherapeutics.

"Early on, I approached Drew for some quick tips about how best to put together a network proposal," said Dr. Bell. "I left with a lot more than advice. Drew instilled in me a vision of what a network could be and the value it could bring to cancer patients. Once we were awarded the grant, I knew I needed a great

CEO to make it all it could be. In almost no time, Drew was able to bring together a very experienced and motivated team and get BioCanRx launched, which reflected how much people enjoyed working with him. Every day I worked with my friend Drew was fun – he had an awesome sense of humor – and made me confident that BioCanRx will be a success."

Prof. Bartha Maria Knoppers, Director of the Centre of Genomics and Policy at McGill University, admired Mr. Lyall for "always reaching out beyond borders and disciplines," and saw him as "a true gentleman whose candour and insight immediately attracted trust and participation."

Dr. Fabio Rossi, Acting Director of the University of British Columbia's Biomedical Research Centre, said Mr. Lyall was one of the most charming people he ever worked with. "His infectious optimism and enthusiasm motivated all around him. He truly was the Network's centre of gravity, and responsible for much of the cohesion that made it a success."

Dr. Rudnicki, who worked side by side with Mr. Lyall for many years at the Network, said his death marks a tremendous loss not just to his family, friends and colleagues, but for health science. "He had so much more to contribute."

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Director of Communications Programs for the Canadian Stem Cell Foundation, is the author of Dreams & Due Diligence - Till and McCulloch's Stem Cell Discovery and Legacy. The quotes included here were collected through interviews and email correspondence.