

OBITUARY
CARY GLYNNE MELLOW
21 NOVEMBER 1956 - 23 MAY 2023
PLASTIC AND RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON

Cary Mellow was a greatly respected and well-loved friend, mentor, teacher and leader in Plastic Surgery, despite facing formidable personal health issues. A very caring individual, he was able to link this to the sound application of medical science and improve the lives of many people in the process. Anyone who knew him for even the shortest time would describe him as kind and humble. If you had known him for slightly longer than that, you would soon discover that he had a subtle way of injecting dry humour into the conversation, usually with a perfectly timed pause beforehand.

Cary was born in Hamilton to Eric Mellow, a storekeeper, and Marion (Tyack). With a younger sister, Cheree, he grew up on the family farm at Tauwhare, near Hamilton. Cary attended Hillcrest Primary School in Hamilton, where he was dux and, with some musical ability, learned to play the piano. Moving on to Hamilton Boys' High School he excelled academically and was dux in 1974 and awarded a University Junior Scholarship. A keen golfer he created a mini-golf course near the family home.

Medical school classmate Chris Milne observed: "Cary commenced at Auckland Medical School in 1975; young and idealistic.

"He impressed us all with his huge intellect and his wonderful way with people. Cary's wry smile was described as 'conveying an air of quiet conspiracy'. He chose Plastic Surgery as a career relatively early in his time at medical school, often helping out in Middlemore Emergency Department suturing injured people and maintaining great loyalty to Middlemore right up to his death."

Following graduation in 1981, Cary completed his house surgeon years in Auckland and then embarked on surgical training in 1983. Gaining a place as a Trainee in Plastic Surgery during the next four years he spent time in both Middlemore Hospital, Auckland, and in Hamilton, and obtained Fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1987. After completing Fellowships in microsurgery in Melbourne with Bernie O'Brien and in Norfolk, Virginia, Cary returned to Middlemore Hospital in 1990, having developed expertise in microvascular and reconstructive surgery and the management of complex hand problems.

Cary married Pauline Margaret Elliott (a nurse) in 1981 and they had two children, David and Sara; each subsequently pursuing their own professional calling. With Pauline he developed a part-time private surgical practice.

Cary served as the Head of Department of Plastic Surgery 1998-2004 before leaving Middlemore to work entirely in private, partly in frustration at the lack of funding for public health. It was clear that this was not a financial decision, and his heart was always at Middlemore. When Cary was asked to consider returning to Middlemore in 2015 to help in the newly opened Manchester Plastic Surgery Suite, he jumped at the opportunity and became the anchor-stone of the "see and treat" skin cancer service there. He will be remembered for his prodigious appetite for work, his patient supervision and guidance of the junior medical staff, his wise council, and his dry sense of humour.

For Cary, work was his passion. He thrived on teaching medical students, house officers and registrars. He loved Middlemore Hospital, and often joked it was his second home. Last year after waking up from a stint in ICU and realising he was in Middlemore, he sighed happily and said: "thank goodness, I'm home".

Cary's career was seriously compromised by his own health issues. A relatively minor congenital spinal problem became complicated by a disc prolapse and the progressive development of spinal stenosis requiring the use of a walking stick and eventually resulting in surgical spinal decompression and fusion. Unfortunately, this was complicated by a heart attack. In 2018 he fell down some stairs sustaining a calcaneal fracture. An infected heel ulcer followed and after multiple dressings, debridement and grafting he underwent a below knee amputation.

A similar situation evolved on the opposite side and also resulted in a below knee amputation. With a powered wheelchair he quickly developed excellent handling skills, rather akin to these of rally drivers.

Despite being wheelchair-bound, Cary continued to work and teach enthusiastically until his life was cut short by a further massive myocardial infarction occurring following a Zoom presentation to the Australasian Students' Surgical Association.

Sara observes: "I knew Dad would be working until he died, I just thought it was going to be far off in the future.

"Whilst I am devastated he is gone, it is lucky in a way that he never had to worry about retiring; luckier for management at Middlemore who at some point would have needed to discuss retirement!"

Cary was an active member of the New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons, the New Zealand Foundation of Cosmetic Plastic Surgery and the New Zealand Society for Surgery of the Hand. He was an Honorary Clinical Senior Lecturer in the Plastic Surgery Unit at Middlemore Hospital, as well as being a Clinical Lecturer with the Auckland University Medical School.

Cary served as an OSCA Examiner for Part I RACS and was an ASSET Tutor. He was author or co-author of 30 articles on reconstructive, cosmetic and plastic surgery and an invited speaker at international Plastic Surgery meetings.

Approximately 15 years ago he started a music theory degree at the University of Auckland but had to give this up part way through when Pauline became ill. Sadly, she died in 2011. Cary's love of music continued throughout his life and he had subscriptions to the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, frequently offering companion tickets to his colleagues and friends.

Cary Mellow died peacefully at Auckland Hospital on 23 May 2023; a much-loved surgeon, mentor, friend and beloved husband of the late Pauline and father of David and Sara. David Mellow notes: "Cary was taken from us far too soon.

“I have learnt that no matter what life throws at you, keep going. He really lived in the moment, loved life, and kept busy, and I know that’s what he wants us to do today, no matter how hard it is to do it without him.”

This obituary was prepared with the assistance of Chris Milne MB ChB, RACS’ Cutting Edge newsletter (December 2022), Sara Mellow FRACP and David Mellow

Dr Allan Panting FRACS