

Keeping watch

Although it's autumn, it's not too cold and the slight breeze blowing up from the sea does not make me regret leaving my jacket in clinic. It's a strange site; hundreds of hospital staff standing on either side of the main road passing the entrance to Singleton Hospital, with almost the entire eye department present. There are hardly any cars on the road anyhow, this being in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, though I do wonder how odd it must be for those few cars that do drive past to see so many people lining the road like this. I am quite glad about the social distancing measures, as I am not so keen to talk to anyone about this, or anything really, and though I see a recently retired vitreoretinal surgeon come down to pay his respects standing opposite me I decide not to cross the road, opting instead for a respectful nod of recognition. I don't think that matters so much anyhow as he is standing next to his non-retired vitreoretinal colleague and so he is not being neglected. Luckily, I don't know either of the people immediately next to me on my side of the road. A friendly eye department auxiliary is close by but due to the size of the gaps left by social distancing she is too far away to speak to comfortably.

Most of us came out a bit early in order not to miss the hearse and looking down Sketty Lane toward the traffic lights I still can't see any sign of the funeral cortege. I ruminated then, as I have ruminated countless times since, on when I first received the phone call informing me of the death of Dave Laws. Three missed calls from a consultant colleague early in the morning after coming out of the shower is rarely a good sign of anything, but this time it was worse than usual. Our previous clinical lead, a much-loved paediatric ophthalmologist and all-round good man, had passed away suddenly in the night having been one of the healthiest people around until then. I had received a WhatsApp communication from him the day before and was involved in an email discussion about his plans as new Llywydd of the RCOphth in Wales the day before that. It's just so strange how a person can be such an important and active part of life one moment and suddenly totally and entirely absent the next.

The crowd seems to rustle in unison and alter their position such, like a flock of resting birds faced with some outside

stimulus perhaps, that I too automatically turn my head to look down the hill. The funeral procession is now in sight and after driving a short distance toward the hospital a man gets out and starts walking in front of the hearse. As the crowd starts clapping, I think of how Dave Laws used to sometimes kayak from his seaside home around the headland in Oxwich Bay to the beach in front of Singleton and then carry his kayak up this very hill. In fact, he entered a competition run by the health board about the most unusual way to get to work and he and his kayak won the day. It was not so long ago that I had helped him manoeuvre his kayak from where he had stored it behind the day surgery unit.

That day surgery unit, where we do almost every cataract in Swansea, was set up by Dave when he was clinical lead the first time and was one of his proudest achievements. The funeral director leading the procession is heading up that way now and passing my position on the road while I can't stop myself gazing at the coffin through the window of the hearse. I recall an incident when I was an ST3 trainee and tore a posterior capsule in the day surgery unit whilst on his list. I remember how awful I felt and how I had told him in the coffee room that I would apply for a job in pathology in order to spare the human race further cataract trauma. Over a cup of tea he explained how everyone gets moments like this and talked me into continuing. He was very good like that. After I came to work in the department as a consultant and would create the occasional ruckus in my attempts to reform the medical retina service, he would jokingly question whether he had done the right thing that day.

It's rare to be loved by all but Dave Laws was. He would invite new trainees for a drink in the Pub on the Pond next to the hospital on induction day, invite whoever was on call on Christmas Day for lunch with him and his family, and encouraged countless medical students to consider ophthalmology as a career. He was a form of glue that held our department together and somehow kept a variety of different and sometimes difficult personalities all yoked to the same plough and working to till the same field. Whilst being affable and friendly he had a well-known way of looking at the world with specific rules that meant everyone knew where they stood. He was the best clinical lead our department

has seen and would have made the best Llywydd had he been given enough time to get to work on his grand projects for eyecare in Wales.

The funeral director gets back in the vehicle now, not far from the day surgery unit, and as the procession picks up speed on their way to the funeral proper the clapping dies away and the crowd starts slowly making its way back toward the hospital. I know I have a few patients waiting. A gust of wind is chill on my skin now and the world greyer than it was before.

I still see his writing in the notes occasionally. Patients still ask about him. Almost a year has gone by and the department is the same, though also different. Dave was an ardent atheist and used to enjoy debating such issues as the afterlife, God and the existence of the soul. Whilst he never believed in a human soul, much less a departmental one, his death seems to have left some space in the eye department where previously none existed. Something ethereal and intangible is missing. A larger-than-life figure who kayaked around Mull and cycled Vietnam, one of his great pieces of advice was to make the most of life in every way. Perhaps this is a wake-up call for us all to make the most of our limited time on earth and to be as decent as we can to each other during that time. With that in mind as I walk to the day surgery unit to do my cataract list and dodge the far heavier traffic to cross the road, I vow to finally finish walking the coast path and finish that medical education qualification. Ye know not when the master of the house cometh.

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