Mark Xavier Shanahan

1923 – 2008

Dr Mark Xavier Shanahan, MD, a renowned Cardio-Thoracic Surgeon at the St Vincents Hospital, Sydney, Australia died in August 2008 at his home in Merimbula, Sydney after a prolonged battle with thyroid cancer.

Dr Shanahan was an Emeritus Professor of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery at the St Vincents Hospital in Sydney – which he joined as a Senior Surgeon in 1963 - and was widely recognized as one of the pioneers of modern-day cardio-thoracic surgery in Australia. Along with Dr Harry Windsor Dr Shanahan was instrumental in starting the Cardio-Vascular Surgery department at the St Vincents Hospital. His untiring work and encouragement of his juniors saw the centre develop into the best in Australia. This was the first centre to start cardio-pulmonary transplant and today is performing the largest number in the Asia-Pacific region. The Institute is a living example of the magic touch of his dynamism. His administrative skill, dedication, firmness with a human touch, meticulous care for detail and 'I - care- for- you' attitude made all the difference in whatever he undertook. There were a lot of incredible advances during his time, such as surgery after heart attack and transplantation, and Mark was in the midst of the lot. He helped to pioneer new techniques ranging from heart valve replacement to coronary artery bypass surgery.

He was an extremely humble and self effacing person – he passed on the mantle of Chairman to his student – Dr Victor Chang - who worshipped him – without any qualms and took voluntary retirement. It was Dr Shanahan who with his fatherly guidance got the centre back on track. Cardiologist and St Vincent's colleague Michael O'Rourke said Dr Shanahan's decision to come out of his retirement after the murder of Dr Chang in 1991 "allowed the spirit of the team to continue".

He had a unrelenting stream of new ideas and a dogged persistence until things came right. During a long and illustrious career, his patients included Australia's best-known heart transplant recipient Fiona Coote and Fred Hollows. He was made an Officer in the Order of Australia – the highest civilian award - in 1988 in recognition of his services to the nation.

He always made time for the eager and inquisitive student. He spent countless hours listening, advising, guiding and teaching. Ever a gentleman, his style was

to challenge, question, and probe but never in a condescending or demeaning way. Former colleagues from Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital remembered him as a "wonderful guy and a terrific inspiration" to generations of younger doctors.

Professor O'Rourke said that Mark would be remembered as "a pioneer, a fine surgeon, a great colleague and role model, and as a generous, thoughtful, dedicated and deeply religious human being".

The Thoracic community has lost a true pioneer, a pre-eminent physician who built and shaped a surgical field, saved countless lives and inspired several generations of surgeons - a man who truly kept moving until the very end.

He was published in many medical journals and newspapers. Dr Shanahan was a very well respected, learned doctor who helped many during his medical career. He was especially helpful to doctors from India with whom he felt a special bond. Most of his students are now renowned leaders in their own right in India. He felt a moral obligation to make sure that registrars from India actually got a hands on training. He respected knowledge and skills and once he knew that you knew your job he would value that.

Dr Shanahan will forever be remembered for his humor and story telling. He was extremely thoughtful and cared greatly for everyone he knew. He was an avid reader, health freak and computer enthusiast – I got sunny positive E mails till almost the day he died. He constantly belittled the problems of health that he was facing and took them in his stride. He enjoyed swimming and canoeing and would think nothing of taking off on the weekend to 'sail around Australia' as he would call it. His outdoor activities gave him a brilliant healthy Hollywood tan. Above all, Dr Shanahan was a man who truly loved life and the people who shared it with him.

Dr Shanahan leaves behind thousands of grateful patients and generations of surgeons to whom he provided mentorship and to whom he was an exemplary role model. He will be greatly missed.

Dr Shanahan is survived by his wife of 50 years, Josephine, and their three surviving children, Antoinette, William and Paul, and eight grandchildren.

Harinder Singh Bedi
Ludhiana, Punjab