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THE KIRBY INSTITUTE FOR INFECTION AND  
IMMUNITY

UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

MEMORIAL FOR THE LATE PROFESSOR  
DAVID COOPER AC

SYDNEY TOWN HALL

THURSDAY, 14 JUNE 2018

DAVID COOPER: MAN WITH A MISSION

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

Patron of the Kirby Institute

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Countries often let us down. It is just the way of the world. But in three important respects, associated with our hero David Cooper, Australia did us proud.

- \* First, this very week, on the eve of this memorial, the Council of the Order of Australia leapt into action. It awarded our country's highest civil honour, posthumously, to David Cooper. Take it from me, things often go wrong in these matters. They take endless time, as everything is checked and rechecked. To honour David, and to do so this week, has allowed Australia to speak with one loud, clear

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\* Patron of the Kirby Institute, UNSW.

voice. David was one of our finest, bravest and best of scientists and citizens. A golden decoration for him reflects the golden wattle of his beloved country. It is a shining consolation for Dorrie and the family. And for his colleagues at the Kirby Institute, and far beyond.

- \* Secondly, doing the right thing at the right time was one of David Cooper's specialties. He was in Boston when HIV first struck. He returned quickly to Australia. What could have been an unmitigated catastrophe, became a brave example by Australia to the world. Our nation responded to this cruel epidemic with rare political harmony, based on scientific evidence. David Cooper gave us the evidence to support the rare national energy and determination. He seized the moment.
- \* And thirdly, there was the leadership that he showed in the following 30 years, in what eventually became known as the Kirby Institute. Chance favours the prepared mind, said Louis Pasteur. David Cooper was tireless in the preparation. He was superbly professional. He gathered together a magnificent team. He reached out, beyond our country. We should be proud of such a scientist and of our country, its universities and the institutions, that produced him. His family that nurtured him. His religion that taught him. The patients that loved him. But he was not ours alone. He belonged to the world of science. Today we honour him as a global hero.

I am here to speak of David Cooper, the man. The obituaries, written since his death, have been full of praise; but also grief. "Brilliant".

“Inclusive”. “Eminent”. “Committed”. “Unwavering”. “Empathetic”. “Different”. “Exciting”. “Nothing average about him”. “His best on frantic days”. You get the picture. However, all these superlatives, even combined, are only part of the full reality of David.

My partner, Johan was at the humble end of David’s great epidemic. He was an Anjali. A volunteer. His clients were David’s patients. They loved David. They told Johan about him, endlessly. He was always there: at the end of the telephone line. And that was in the days before mobile phones. A 24 hour service for a mighty crisis. The calm voice at the middle of a terrible storm.

But surely this paragon had faults? To be human is to have faults?

- \* According to Basil Donovan, he had absolutely no dress sense in the early days. He repeatedly wore crumpled clothes and colours that clashed until safely hidden beneath his white lab coat. We put that down to the ‘eccentric professor’ in him and all was forgiven;
- \* He did sometimes neglect the people he loved most: Dorrie and his family. Too much time on planes. Too many days in airports, in far away places. We can also forgive this. He was a man transfixed by a global epidemic. It became his life’s mission;
- \* According to John Kaldor, he loved gossip. But this was not, “to be nasty or prurient. Just to understand where people are coming from. He was fascinated by all things that made us human”. His epidemics, all of them, were oh so human. He knew and understood the very core of the human condition; and

- \* He would sit quietly in meetings where professors and new interns would clash like children. And then, as Professor Kaldor puts it, “starting with a high pitched, slightly quavering voice, he would pretend to timidity”, give leadership and settle the way ahead. No one believed the timidity – not for a moment. Everyone felt the leadership.

The worst tragedy about the premature death of David Cooper would be if his legacy were now to die. If HIV and other blood borne diseases of the human condition were to be reclaimed, remedicalised and returned entirely to the medical experts. David was the supreme interdisciplinarian. He was the master of team work. He smashed the silos of our minds.

David Cooper’s team must stay together. They must continue his work. David Cooper Memorial Fund has been established as a way to channel the efforts of the many people who wish to support his legacy. The challenge is by no means over and I urge you all to support the Fund so we can continue David’s energy. And when HIV, HCV and the rest are safely tamed, his lesson will remain to inspire researchers and physicians of the future.

When tears are no more, a quiet determination will remain. To continue the research. To maintain the energy. To preserve the team work. And to uphold the loving kindness (“*chesed*”) that was at the very heart’s core of David Cooper.

So what is the sum of it? He saved lives. He reduced pain. He unveiled the mysteries of disease. In the words of the Psalmist: For so much, how

can we ever repay our debt?<sup>1</sup> And the answer comes back: by defending, preserving and advancing David Cooper's legacy. That legacy needs our support. This also is the way of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Psalms* (Psalm 116 verse 12).