

Dr Hugh O'Donnell, 1943–2022

Pillar of the community, great friend, family man and local legend are terms Hugh O'Donnell vividly embodied. He is fondly remembered by thousands of patients of his rural North Oxfordshire practice who benefited from his exceptional bedside manner. Hugh had a keen clinical mind; this, combined with his compassionate nature, meant that many patients, friends and family now live happier, healthier, and more fulfilled lives.



Many remember, when talking to 'Dr Hugh', one felt like the most important person to him, at that moment, which you probably were. His care was all enveloping. In snowy conditions 'Dr Hugh' would load paving slabs into his MK III Gilbern Invader to navigate the slippery farm tracks to patients' homes. He gracefully accepted a small punnet of Christmas almonds from a gummy octogenarian, who, unable to bite, had already removed the sugar coating for him. He picked up the phone automatically in his sleep. His 'nose' would twitch at the slightest symptom and he would commonly persist in treatment being sought, often with life-saving results. He would insist on police escorts complete with blues-and-twos, to accompany pregnant mothers into hospitals when needing emergency help. For the bereaved and depressed he would walk for miles and listen for hours. 'Dr Hugh' would hatch, match and dispatch his adored patients and revel in their life cycles, in which he played a crucial caring role. He embodied the oath 'do no harm': he was there for everyone, all the time.

Driven by an English brain and an Irish heart, Hugh was funny, clever, kind and wise. He had a formidable intellect of humanitarian bent. As a 'prolapsed' Catholic he sometimes had an irascible spirit but also the empirical mind of scientist. These combined to give Hugh a holistic understanding of what it is to be human. His interests were fun, friends, family, food, wine, stories, song, art, laughter, politics, history, children, dogs, gardens, cricket, rugby, shooting and golf but his overwhelming interest was books.

The walls of his home are lined with hundreds of books. He had read them all. Some repeatedly. His conversations inevitably encouraged participants to consider the wider picture, to see humanity in all its messy interconnected glory. Yet at the same time he made you feel that your place in this world was more important than it was at the beginning of the conversation. In short, he made you think big and that you were special. This was not all one-way traffic. The night after his death, Deddington church glowed in a projected light of Irish emerald green as a gesture of love and respect by the community. During his lifetime countless smaller gestures of love and respect would appear on his table and doorstep: in spring, whole carcasses of lamb; at Christmas dozens of bottles and hundreds of cards. Because he loved, he was loved.

Hugh was born in Hackney during WWII to an Irish doctor father and an English mother, the fifth of eight rambunctious children raised in a family surgery. To set the scene, a regular and depressed patient of his father's, Giles the cartoonist, took Hugh's formidable grandmother as the inspiration for his ferocious grandma character. Hugh was one of those Blitz battered ragamuffins who would feel his grandmother's wrath via the handle of her umbrella. The competition of home life propelled him at school although enlightenment was not confined to books. Whilst attending Wimbledon College, aged 14, he met the love of his life, the beautiful Vivien Rich, under the stage in a joint school production. They lived and loved one another for 64 years until death parted them the day before his birthday.

At 18 Hugh became a medical student at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington. Being a London Irish 'Mary's man' helped forge his adult identity. At St Mary's, he formed lifelong friendships, played senior level rugby, boxed, studied hard, winning an international scholarship to New York. Newly qualified, Hugh married Viv in Kingston-upon-Thames in 1967. Their first child, a son, was born in 1969 and another in 1971. In 1972 the young family moved from London to Barford St Michael and Hugh was invited to join in the Health Centre in Deddington where he spent the rest of his working life. The family lived in South Newington for the 1970s when two daughters were born in 1974 and 1976 and moved to Deddington in 1984.

Hugh is missed by all who knew him. Nobody feels this more than Viv. We trust Deddington will hold her tight.

Dan O'Donnell