

Resolution of Council

16 April 2018

Item 3.1

Vale David Cooper AO

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I inform Council of the death of the eminent Australian immunologist, Professor David Albert Cooper AO on Sunday 18 March 2018.

Professor Cooper was an international leader in the fight against HIV and AIDS for over three decades, as a prominent medical researcher, clinician and personal doctor of many people affected by HIV related illness.

As a young immunologist working in the United States in the early 1980s, he first learned about the devastating effects of an unnamed virus on young, mostly gay men. He expected to encounter something similar when he returned to work at St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst, in the heart of Sydney's gay male community. Research into this virus (later universally known as HIV for human immuno-deficiency virus) became his life's work.

His work in identifying the seroconversion illness accompanying initial HIV infection in many people was an early breakthrough, having a major impact on HIV diagnosis and the search for treatments. He subsequently took a leading role in research and trials of therapies for HIV which led to the use of combination treatments which have made HIV infection a chronic, manageable illness. Many people with HIV are now able to live fulfilling productive lives with reasonable life expectancy.

In 1986, Professor Cooper became the inaugural director of the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, now the Kirby Institute. Under his leadership, it has grown to become a globally renowned research institute working at the forefront of the latest discoveries and innovations in HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections.

I was proud to present the Keys of the City to the Kirby Institute in February last year in recognition of its outstanding work.

David did not confine his work to Australia. He served as President of the International AIDS Society from 1994 to 1998. While President, he led the 1996 International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, Canada at which the introduction of combination therapy was reported. This involved treating patients with multiple drugs or medications and was a turning point in the history of AIDS.

David also used his influence to ensure the 2000 global HIV conference took place in Durban, in the region of the world most affected by HIV. This helped show the world that treatment should be available to all. Within a year, billions of dollars were being directed towards treatment access in the poorer countries of the world. Global equity in the treatment of HIV remains the standard, one of the few diseases where this is the case.

In 1996, he co-founded HIV-NAT, a clinical research and trials collaboration based at the Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Centre at the Chulalongkorn University Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand. He later led HIV research in Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar.

He was working right up to the time of his illness, running large-scale international clinical trials to improve HIV treatment, working on research in Indonesia and Myanmar, and leading the trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis to eliminate HIV transmission in NSW.

Professor Cooper was equally committed to challenging the stigma associated with HIV as addressing the challenges of HIV itself. Much of his research achievements were due to his willingness to forge strong relationships with Sydney's gay community and its leaders, winning their respect and trust.

He also recognised that HIV was not merely a medical issue. Fighting HIV challenge at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s also required standing up for human rights and combatting ignorance and prejudice. A lack of understanding and knowledge of HIV encouraged fear-based homophobia and AIDSphobia, often flamed by a sensationalist media. In the early years, before treatments became readily available, the number of patients presenting with HIV was high, with many of his patients not surviving. This did not deter Professor Cooper and his colleagues from providing the care they needed or embracing the LGBTIQ community. In 1999, he led the Kirby Institute's first entry in the Mardi Gras parade, accompanied by dozens of staff members and his then teenage daughters Becky and Ilana.

There have been many people in Australia and overseas who have paid tribute to his life and work. The Lancet described Professor Cooper as "Australia's fighter against HIV and discrimination", and noted that "Cooper's work has helped transform Australia's research landscape". It wrote:

"His quest to remove the stigma surrounding AIDS patients and to share his knowledge on HIV and other infectious diseases to disadvantaged communities symbolise his devotion to the greater good."

In 2016, Professor Cooper told The Lancet:

"The story of HIV is a modern medical miracle. From despair and tragedy, we have moved into an era of chronic treatable illness, in just 30 years."

The achievement of this modern miracle owes much to David Cooper's work.

In recognition of David's outstanding contribution to the international fight against HIV, the Kirby Institute is planning to hold a public memorial event in Sydney Town Hall on Thursday

14 June 2018. The event will enable David's colleagues from Australia and overseas, people living with HIV and the LGBTI community to celebrate David's life.

Given his outstanding contribution, not least in enabling many of our residents to lead fulfilling, productive lives, I propose that the City waive the venue hire fees of Sydney Town Hall as a contribution to this event.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons present in the Chamber stand for one minute's silence to mark the life of Professor David Albert Cooper AO and his outstanding national and international contribution to HIV medicine and human rights in Sydney, New South Wales and Australia;
- (B) a letter, under the Lord Mayor's signature, be conveyed to Professor Cooper's wife, Dorrie, expressing Council's sincere condolences to her and her family; and
- (C) the City of Sydney waive the hiring fees for Sydney Town Hall as a value-in-kind contribution to a public memorial event celebrating Professor Cooper's life.

Carried unanimously.

Note – The Chair (the Lord Mayor) welcomed and acknowledged the presence in the Council Chamber of the family of David Cooper: Dorrie Cooper, Ilana Cooper and Bec Cooper; and also representatives of the Kirby Institute and others – Alex Greenwich MP, Bill Bowtell AO, Chris Puplick AM, Professor Andrew Grulich, Professor Rebecca Guy, Dr Bridget Haire, Daren Draganic, Janette Button and Luci Bamford.

Note – All Councillors, staff, press and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to David Cooper.