

**Item 3.1****Vale Mary-Louise McLaws AO****File No: S051491****Minute by the Lord Mayor**

To Council:

I wish to inform Council of the passing of Emeritus Professor Mary-Louise McLaws AO, internationally recognised epidemiologist and public health specialist, on 12 August 2023.

Australians came to know Professor McLaws through her many media appearances during the Covid-19 pandemic, calmly and gracefully explaining it and the actions we needed to take to limit its impacts. The Chief Executive Officer and I had the benefit of her advice to guide the City of Sydney's response, including difficult decisions around the New Year's Eve fireworks.

Born in Tasmania on 17 March 1953, she was the second child of Jewish parents Barry and Louise Viney. Mary-Louise and her older brother, Barrie, spent their early years with their mother in Bondi, before moving to the Central Coast where she attended Gosford High School. She took the surname of her stepfather, Bruce McLaws.

She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Sydney, following it with a Diploma in Tropical Public Health in 1984 and a Master's degree in Public Health in 1987.

In 1986, she met the late Professor David Cooper AC, who invited her to join the HIV and AIDS research laboratory he was establishing at the University of NSW. She commenced a PhD, researching condom use behaviour in homosexually active men at risk of AIDS, supervised by Professor Cooper. It was an important contribution to HIV prevention, assisted by the close personal and professional relationships she established with community AIDS organisations.

Completing her thesis in 1992, she joined the University of NSW's academic staff as an assistant professor in epidemiology, later becoming Professor, Epidemiology, Healthcare Infection and Infectious Diseases Control in the University's school of public health and community medicine.

Over the next 30 years, Professor McLaws made a significant academic contribution, writing more than 180 research papers, while teaching, mentoring students and supervising and supporting their research.

Her research in epidemiology, infection control and patient safety extended her work beyond the University. As a long-time member of NSW Health's Clinical Excellence Commission, she collaborated in implementing state-wide infection prevention programs in hospital settings including intensive care units and hospital emergency departments.

As director of Sydney South West Area Health Service's Public Health Unit, she made significant contributions to eliminating HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C and containing the spread of the swine flu.

Professor McLaws also made a significant international contribution to public health. In 2002, she became an adviser for World Health Organisation (WHO), working on the ground in Hong Kong and Malaysia and Beijing to help control Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and develop their surveillance systems. In Beijing she collaborated on research to understand why healthcare workers acquired SARS in response to the outbreak of the disease. Her other international work included infection control research in Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, Mali, Indonesia, Iran, Viet Nam, Taiwan and Turkey.

In February 2020, she joined other experts at Geneva's WHO headquarters to make sense of an emerging international public health emergency. The cause, a new disease named Covid-19 in the same month, would dominate her life for the next two years.

As a member of the WHO Covid-19 expert advisory panel, she would attend online meetings which continued some hours after midnight Sydney time because of international time differences while continuing her University of NSW day job. She told a journalist she was “constantly jetlagged” but was always happy to sacrifice sleep to be informed by cutting-edge, ever-changing scientific research.

This, together with her own research, enabled her to advocate for evidenced-based public policy to respond to Covid. In the early days of the pandemic, she called for Australia to close its borders and urged people not to attend the ultimately cancelled 2020 Melbourne Grand Prix. She was among the first experts to talk about the need for face masks and dedicated quarantine facilities, rather than keeping overseas arrivals in poorly ventilated hotels.

Much of her time was dedicated to educating the public about Covid, by making herself available to journalists at all hours and through numerous media appearances.

Susannah Elliott, CEO of the Australian Science Media Centre, said Professor McLaws “was always calm, measured and available.”

“She had a skill for connecting with people through her boundless empathy and genuine willingness to help – she was a truly brilliant science communicator. She was also incredibly modest, asking for feedback on her interviews and open to suggestions on how she could improve.”

The Federal Health Minister, Mark Butler, said that “to see her on TV outline in a very calm but authoritative and articulate way, the best way we could protect ourselves was a source of great reassurance to the Australian people.”

In early 2022, Professor McLaws was diagnosed with a brain tumour and took leave from the University of NSW and WHO to begin cancer treatment, while encouraging people to donate to brain cancer research.

In June 2022, she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia “for distinguished service to medical research, particularly to epidemiology and infection prevention, to tertiary education, and to health administration” and was one of 92 Australians recognised in a special Covid-19 honour roll.

Professor McLaws is survived by Richard Flook, her husband of 35 years, and her children Zia and Zachary.

**Recommendation**

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Professor Mary-Louise McLaws AO and her outstanding contribution to public health and epidemiological research in Australia and internationally;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Professor McLaws' husband, Richard Flook, and her children Zia and Zachary; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor convey Council's sincere condolences to Professor McLaws' family.

**COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE**

Lord Mayor