

On Losing Paddy Johnston

BRUCE A. CHABNER

Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Words do not adequately describe our feelings of sadness and loss with the sudden and totally unexpected passing of Patrick G. Johnston, M.D., the President and Vice Chancellor of Queen's University Belfast and one of the foremost medical oncologists, cancer center leaders, and educators of his generation. At age 58, "Paddy" was marching onward in his career with the sole aim of bringing his university into elite status, enjoying success at every step since returning to Belfast to build its cancer center in 1998. His sudden collapse and death during a bike ride along the beautiful countryside of his beloved Donegal, Ireland, on June 4, 2017, brought a beautiful life to an end.

I first met Paddy when he came to the National Cancer Institute (NCI) as a visiting fellow 30 years ago. He had graduated from medical school and oncology training in Dublin and was interested in learning translational research in gastrointestinal tumors under the tutelage of Carmen Allegra at NCI. As part of Carmen's team, we came to know him, his wife Iseult, and his four sons as close friends. I remember vividly Paddy coming to our house and noticing that one of the boys had a black eye, which Paddy explained was a daily event for the rambunctious little brawlers. Thereafter, Paddy's career ascended as he did important correlative studies showing the importance of thymidylate synthase expression in outcomes of adjuvant 5-fluorouracil for colorectal cancer. He was an outstanding clinician, a soft-spoken but serious man who always made the clearest argument, never overstating his case, but nailing the verdict. It was clear that this man had management and leadership skills beyond most of his peers.

After a brief stint at Johns Hopkins, he made the difficult decision to take up the challenge of founding a cancer center in Belfast at a time of "the troubles," the term used to describe Northern Ireland's religious and political strife. We worried that the circumstances would not yield to his persuasion and

leadership, but he proved beyond any expectation that leadership and conviction in behalf of a noble cause could prevail. He attracted funding from London, the local government, industry, and philanthropy; he sent his best people abroad for training with the confidence that they could become major participants in molecular oncology and genetics, and he was proved right. New clinical and laboratory buildings arose, and even biotech industry flourished under his guidance. In 2007, he became

dean of the School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences at Queen's, setting an example that set the school on a new path. All the while, he was the catalyst for organizing international efforts to support his medical school, cancer center, and a flourishing biotech industry, aided by friends such as our own Martin Murphy, cofounder of this journal, and others from the American-Irish community. Three years ago, he was again promoted, this time to President and Vice Chancellor of the University, the highest academic office, and set in motion plans to bring Queen's to the forefront of universities in the U.K., with Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Manchester. Throughout his career in the upper reaches of administration, he continued to write grants,

publish good papers, see patients, and participate in cancer meetings. Such was his energy and his passion.

An active and fit person, no one would have imagined this untimely and sudden end to this man's life. He leaves Iseult, his beloved wife of 32 years who has pursued her own career in physical medicine, his sons Seamus, Eoghan, Niall, and Ruairi, sisters Eleanor and Fionnuala, brothers Michael, James, Brian, and Niall, and his young grandchildren Harry and Abigail, of whom he was immensely proud. Belfast, the U.K., Europe, and indeed the world of oncology has lost one of its bright stars, not to mention the personal loss of a father, husband, and a friend to the many others who grieve. There is no justice in death, only memories of a beautiful life and gratitude for the brief time given to such a dear person.



Patrick G. Johnston, M.D.