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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONDOLENCES

Colvin, Mr Mark

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (17:27): Today I join with my colleagues to pay tribute to Mark Colvin but I will talk about the contribution he made to advocacy on organ and tissue donation. We have heard many excellent stories about his fine contribution to journalism, his significant contribution to journalism over decades and decades. We have heard many wonderful stories about the power of his voice, about the depth and creaminess of that voice which we would end our days listening to. It was a wonderful voice. He was an excellent journalist. He was an experienced journalist who had travelled the world, experienced the troubles of the world and returned here to Australia.

We have heard so many stories on his contribution to journalism that I want to focus today instead of his contribution to the organ and tissue donation advocacy sector because his contribution was significant, as it was to journalism. Before I became the member for Canberra, I was an active member on the Gift of Life board, which was an organ and tissue donation awareness group that was set up here in Canberra to advocate and to raise awareness about the need for people to have a conversation with their loved ones, for people to actually sign the register and to raise awareness.

In Australia, more than 80 per cent of Australians think that organ and tissue donation is a wonderful idea. They love the idea but they do not actually sign up and they do not actually have a conversation with their family, which is absolutely vital. Having been actively involved in this sector, I understand the fact that many Australians find it very confronting to talk about organ and tissue donation because it involves talking about someone's end of life. Many Australians find it difficult to talk about death. They find it difficult to talk about end of life management plans and pain management plans. Organ and tissue donation encompasses pain management and end of life management, as well as the extraction of organs and tissue, so it can be quite confronting for a lot of Australians.

Mark Colvin was such a very strong advocate for it on a national basis. I did not share some of his views on ways to raise awareness and to lift our numbers, which pale compared to our colleagues in the US—from memory—and also Spain. Despite the fact that we have the world's best transplant health services here in the country, we still do not have the rates that we should have given the fact that, from survey results, Australians seem to support the concept of organ and tissue donation. He made a very fine contribution to raise awareness about that. It was his great commitment. It was a passion for him after he contracted the disease that we have heard about today when he visited Africa to cover the massacres in Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Congo. He said at that time:

My own immune system went a bit mad and started attacking me.

One of the results was long-term kidney damage. He was in hospital for six months and he was very ill back then. Mark Colvin began dialysis as a result of that dreadful disease that he caught in Africa. He began dialysis in 2010 after his kidney function dropped to just 10 per cent. That is a significant loss. The process of cleaning kidneys of toxins—as we know and as anyone who has been to a dialysis centre knows—is not only incredibly confronting but also incredibly time-consuming in the fact that you have to sit there for hours and hours each day to go through dialysis multiple times a week. There have been significant inroads made with portable dialysis machines where people can do it from their beds at home or as they are asleep at home, but the bulk of Australians still have to go to a dialysis centre and sit there for hours and hours each day many times a week to go through that dialysis process. It is deeply confronting. For anyone who has been to a dialysis centre, it is deeply confronting. You cannot come away without feeling absolutely broken-hearted for those people that are going through the dialysis, not just because of the pain that they are going through due to the fact that they have a particular disease but also because they are chained to this machine just to survive.

As we know, it takes about five hours each day, but there is also the preparation, the travel time and also the recovery time. He described that process as an 'emotional rollercoaster' that had him feeling landlocked. He could not travel to see his friends in Melbourne or Brisbane and could not see his ageing mother here in Canberra. He said:

There are things you'd like to do, go to Brisbane or see things like the Mona exhibition in Tassie, or go down to mum's place in the country for Christmas which I was able to do for two years running because I was able to get relief dialysis ... She lives near Canberra but this Christmas there was no room in the relief dialysis place so I had to go down for literally one night, for the night of Christmas Day and drive straight back to Sydney the next day. You're completely geographically changed.

That is what dialysis means. He spoke about it, as usual, in such an eloquent and powerful way. We have heard that he finally got a kidney transplant from one of his oldest friends, Mary-Ellen Field. There was a suggestion that his two boys could donate their kidneys, but that put fear into him. I have a quote here of him saying that. So he did get the kidney from Mary-Ellen Field, and 16 days after receiving his new kidney he was saying he had never felt better in years.

As we know, we have had the tragic loss of this incredible journalist. He was a Renaissance man in many ways and a very, very strong advocate for organ and tissue donation. He had been an advocate for organ and tissue donation for many years. He said he made it his life's work to ensure everybody has a conversation about organ and tissue donation. In 2013 he was honoured for his contribution to the organ and tissue donation sector by the ACT Gift of Life Awards that were presented by the then ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher. With his colleagues Deb Masters and Sarah Ferguson and the rest of the *Four Corners* team, Mark Colvin received the Angus Fairbairn-Cody Award for media coverage for that significant contribution that was made with that very compelling, powerful and heartrending piece on *Four Corners* that was produced by those stellar journalists and producers.

In closing, I just want to say to everyone who is listening that this is a man who, unfortunately, due to his career, his lust for life, his lust for adventure, his lust to deliver the story to show what was actually happening in the world and to show the reality of the world to Australians, contracted a disease that caused him to require a kidney transplant. As a result he became a very strong advocate for organ and tissue donation.

In closing, I implore Australians: have the conversation with your family about your intentions to make organ and tissue donations. Families can overturn them. Even though you have the card and you have said you want to donate your organs and tissues, your families can overturn your wishes once you are gone, so you need to make it crystal clear that this is your intention. You need to sign up to the organ and tissue donation register. Most importantly, you need to have that conversation with your families so that they are clear that this is your desire when you are gone. One donor can transform 10 lives. In Mark Colvin's memory and out of respect for his mother, Anne; his wife, Michele; and his sons, Nicolas and William, I do implore Australians to donate life. Vale Mark Colvin.