tribute

In memoriam: Stewart Charles Whitman (1964-2010)[1]

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It was a beautiful calm February night in 2007 on the trails of the Gatineau Park above Ottawa, where four young enthusiastic skiers were having one of their regular outings on cross country trails above Meech Lake. Stewart Whitman, an ardent skier, jogger and biker, was one of them. Stew would fall that evening and although the fall was not of consequence, it would lead in the days to come to back pain that required a hospital visit. Radiography would provide the first indication of something sinister that was subsequently diagnosed as a rare aggressive tumor of neuroendocrine cell origin. This was devastating news, which Stew eventually surmounted with the unique courage that was his. He fought his illness with utmost optimism and determination for almost three years. During this time, he would continue his work with passion and encourage his students and collaborators to pursue their experiments. Stew passed away on Friday, February 19, 2010 at the age of 45. He leaves behind his wife, Dana, and daughters McKenzie (13) and Grace (10).

Stewart Whitman received his formal training at the University of Western Ontario, where he obtained a B.Sc. in Microbiology and Immunology. However, because he was raised in the countryside, he temporarily returned to his roots and opened a business as a landscape architect. He took great pleasure in nature throughout his life, and recently took pride in his designs for a number of unique meditation spots in his backyard. For this he planted a number of beautiful trees and set up flower beds, walkways, and benches so that his family and friends could enjoy the beauty of the land in the years to come.

But after a few years as a landscaper, Stewart's intellect was longing for greater things. So he returned to the University of Western Ontario to complete his MSc in Anatomy with Dr. Kem Rogers, followed by a PhD in Biochemistry in 1997 with Dr. Murray Huff. He excelled in graduate school, publishing numerous papers and establishing himself as a leader among his peers. For his success, he was awarded scholarships from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and the former Medical Research Council of Canada. Stewart established for the first time that remnant lipoproteins, especially following

oxidative modification, induce macrophage foam cell formation, a critical factor in atherogenesis. He then took his postdoctoral training at the University of Kentucky in Lexington under the supervision of Dr. Alan Daugherty, where he was again supported by fellowships from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and then the American Heart Association. Stew's arrival for his fellowship at the University of Kentucky coincided with Alan's arrival on faculty. There probably could not have been a more chaotic start to a fellowship. Stew's first tasks were unpacking boxes and connecting instruments so that he could work in a functional laboratory. Despite this disorderly beginning, Stew thrived as an engine of creative thinking that was integrated with meticulously designed, executed, and documented experiments. He had 12 publications

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during his fellowship, which included comprehensive and highly cited manuscripts on the role of interferon γ in atherosclerosis. As well as for his energetic professional demeanor, Stew was also known for his skillful execution of practical jokes. His colleagues at the University of Kentucky sorely missed him, professionally and personally, when he returned to his mother country to embark on his faculty life.

In 2001, Stewart Whitman was appointed as scientist at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute where he was associated with the members of Lipoprotein and Atherosclerosis Research Group and the Vascular Biology Group. His appointment as Assistant Professor in the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine gave him access to the expertise and support of the core pathologists. He rapidly succeeded in obtaining grant support from the Heart and Stroke Foundations of Ontario and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, as well as a number of personnel awards, including the Great West Life and London Life Research Award of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, the Early Researcher Award from the Government of Ontario, and the Young Investigator Award from Pfizer Canada. With this success, he was promoted to Associate Professor in 2007.

When Stew was setting up his lab, he displayed a unique capacity for inventiveness. He was expert at stretching his grant dollars. Shopping on eBay for used scientific equipment, he made some great acquisitions. But by paying with PayPal, he did not endear himself with the accounting department. Soon his lab was operating and numerous colonies of genetically modified mice started to populate the animal care vivarium. As he was becoming known in the scientific community, his open and collaborative spirit helped numerous colleagues within both the Ottawa and national research communities, who brought their samples to Stew for his unique skills in the analysis of histopathology, particularly in examining the early stages of atherosclerosis. It soon became evident that there was a need for a specialized lab for analysis of atherosclerosis and other cardiovascular pathologies. As was typical of Stew, he decided to dedicate the equipment he had acquired from the Canadian Foundation for Innovation, and with the support of UOHI, to establish the Histopathology Core Laboratory, which provides state of the art analysis of specimens with cardiovascular pathologies for scientists across the Ottawa medical and scientific community. In 2008, this laboratory was named the Stewart Whitman Histopathology Core laboratory in recognition of his contributions and his focus on excellence that have made this facility so essential.

As a scientist, Stew was a man of integrity, honesty, and honor; he was a great inspiration and role model for his students, whose support during his illness was uplifting for all around him. The courage of Stew to continue his work and devote himself to his students and collaborators during the painful last three years has motivated many around him. In his last year, he applied for a new grant entitled "Defining the mechanism(s) by which the cellular inhibitor of apoptosis protein 2 (cIAP2) contributes to early stage atherosclerosis development". This project was fully funded by CIHR with a five year grant, a rare feat in these times of restricted support for research. When we complimented Stew on this award, he said "Yes, thank you, this was my most sexy research project". It is an exciting project indeed, which will hopefully find a new investigator to carry the idea forward.

As was said by one of his collaborators, "the world has lost a brilliant and dedicated scientist". His colleagues at the Heart Institute will ensure that all his work under way is finished and published as well as organize a Symposium on Atherosclerosis named after him that will gather scientists from across Canada and the US who share his interests.

Written by the named authors on behalf of Stewart's friends and fellow scientists.