

Radio astronomer's death shocks colleagues

Tributes pour in for advocate of Square Kilometre Array telescope project.

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Friends and colleagues have paid tribute to astrophysicist Steven Rawlings of the University of Oxford, UK, who died in mysterious circumstances on Wednesday 11 January. Rawlings, 50, was a key figure in the [Square Kilometre Array \(SKA\) Telescope Project](#) (read [Nature's News Feature on the SKA](#)).

Rawlings' body was found at a bungalow in Southmoor, a small town on the outskirts of Oxford. A 49-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of murder, and has now been released on bail.

"It's a great shock," says astronomer George Miley at Leiden Observatory in the Netherlands, a friend of Rawlings for more than 20 years and vice-president of the executive committee of the [International Astronomical Union](#).

Describing Rawlings as "the kind of person you'd want to sit down and have a beer with", Miley also called him a "brilliant scientist". "His death will be a great loss to SKA, he was extremely important in determining the whole scientific case for SKA," he says.

If it gets built, the SKA — which gets its name from the total collecting area covered by its 3,000 or so proposed antennas — would be the biggest telescope ever built. The US\$2.1-billion project would allow astronomers to study how primordial gas formed the first stars and galaxies. It should also help scientists probe the strange phenomenon of dark energy — thought to be driving the accelerating expansion of the Universe — by looking at how it has shaped galactic clusters, for example. The SKA would also study how Earth-like planets are formed around young stars.

Although construction of the telescope is not due to commence until 2016, the pivotal decision about whether to locate it in South Africa or Australia is expected in March. It's impossible to say whether Rawlings' death will have an impact on this decision, says Richard Schilizzi, international director of the SKA project at the University of Manchester, UK. "But Steve would have had an input on the UK's position," he says.

To a degree, the SKA will be Rawlings' legacy, says Schilizzi. "He had a long-standing role, and was a project scientist for some years. He was responsible, along with Chris Carilli at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, for putting together the scientific case for SKA. That was a major contribution," he says.

Indeed, Rawlings played a key role in opening the eyes of the astronomical community to what the SKA could achieve, Schilizzi adds. "He was a really great scientist, one of those really bright people with enthusiasm for science. A very clever man and a strategic thinker."

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Astrophysicist Steven Rawlings of the University of Oxford, UK, was a key member of the Square Kilometre Array telescope project.