

Obituary

Shirley Nolan 1942–2002



Shirley Nolan died in Adelaide, Australia on 14 July. It is customary in obituaries not to allude in too much detail to the manner of a person's death, but Shirley would have complained vocally about any such omission on grounds of politesse. She developed Parkinson's disease at a comparatively young age in the early 1980s and became increasingly incapacitated thereafter. Recently she felt that her life had become totally unbearable and she strongly advocated legalisation of voluntary euthanasia. In the event she planned her funeral and finally took her own life.

Shirley was born in England, but emigrated to Australia in the early 1970s. There in 1972 her first child, Anthony, was born with Wiscott–Aldrich syndrome characterised by a severe immune deficiency and thrombocytopenia, effec-

tively untreatable at that time. When she learned that a child with a similar condition had been treated at the Westminster Hospital she instantly came to London with Anthony and sought the same treatment for him. HLA typing was then still in its infancy, but it soon became clear that neither parent was a suitable donor. Shirley focused then on what was logically the next question – was there an unrelated donor who could serve equally well? Most haematologists at the time were not immediately enamoured of the idea of HLA-typing large numbers of volunteers from the general public in the hope of finding just one suitable donor, but Shirley's enthusiasm and commitment were persuasive. The project was publicised by every available route and more than 300 000 potential donors were tissue-typed in the next few years. Sadly no match was found and Anthony died in 1979 without ever having received a transplant.

Shirley's efforts continued unabated. The Anthony Nolan Laboratories were established in Anthony's memory at St Mary Abbot's Hospital in west London and for a while Shirley was personally responsible for raising the funds to continue tissue typing the potential donors, of whom there was no shortage. The whole operation was radically reorganised in the late 1980s with major financial support from the Round Tables of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and a new building was constructed to rehouse the increasingly overcrowded laboratory. Today the Anthony Nolan Trust operates a major tissue typing facility linked academically with the Royal Free Hospital in London and, of at least equal importance, supports a research institute dedicated to improving the results of allogeneic stem cell transplantation using unrelated donors. The Trust has more than 300 000 donors on its books and annually facilitates transplants for 300 patients in the UK, elsewhere in Europe, North American and the rest of the world.

Internationally Shirley must be remembered as one of those rare visionaries who see more clearly than others the shape of things to come. They routinely face enormous opposition from those who favour maintaining the *status quo*, but their energy and clarity of vision eventually prevail. The register of volunteer donors that Shirley created served as a model for establishing the National Marrow Donor Program in the US and numerous similar registries in almost every developed country of the world. This remarkable international achievement is the true memorial for Anthony and for Shirley.

John Goldman
London, July 2002

Bone Marrow Transplantation (2002) **30**, 627.
doi:10.1038/sj.bmt.1703720