

OBITUARY



Richard Szydlo, July 1 1959–December 18 2023

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Dr Richard Szydlo, a senior biostatistician within the Centre for Haematology at Imperial College London (ICL), was a life-long resident of North-West London. His parents, Kazimierz and Daniela settled in the UK in the late 1940s, Kazimierz a distinguished and highly decorated veteran of the Carpathian Brigade, who had fought at Tobruk and throughout Italy, and Daniela as a refugee having survived deportation to Siberia followed by 5 years in Polish camps in India. Kazimierz and Daniela married in 1947 and made a new life in the UK, with Richard (Ryszard) being the youngest of their three children. They were part of the growing Polish community in the area, maintaining the culture and traditions that became integral to Richard's own life. Richard obtained a scholarship to The Latymer School, where he excelled at cricket and rugby, graduated in 1980 from Portsmouth with a BSc degree in zoology, and was awarded his PhD from the same institution in 1987, with a thesis focused on the pharmacokinetics on insecticide analogues in the mustard beetle.



Richard Szydlo

Fortunately for haematology and in particular, the evolving field of haemopoietic cell transplantation (HCT), he abandoned a career as a bench scientist and joined the Department of Haematology at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School (later incorporated within ICL in 1999) in 1989 as a medical statistician. He gained a Masters in Medical Statistics from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1992. During this time he established an in-house database to record HCT outcome enabling in-depth analysis of transplant data internally, and submission to the national and global registries. The HCT unit is now acknowledged as one of the most comprehensive, accurate, reliable and up-to-date reporting centres worldwide. Richard was often the first to notice unusual outcomes and coincidences and to encourage his clinic colleagues to interrogate the data more closely. This work resulted in the publication of more than 100 peer-reviewed articles from the Department that directly impacted the approach to patient selection, treatment and management. Through his work, the HCT unit at ICL became internationally recognised as a centre of excellence. Richard gained global acclaim in the field of HCT and worked with the British, European and International Societies of Blood and Marrow Transplant (BSBMT, EBMT, CIBMTR) to support their research output. Over the past decade, he worked as the biostatistician at the Anthony Nolan Research Institute to lend his skills to their research group. His expertise was much utilised outside HCT as he facilitated the wider Centre research in all blood diseases. A quick search on PubMed will reveal his enormous contribution but it cannot tell you about the person behind the work. Richard's kind, patient, unassuming and generous nature gave so many students, research fellows and medical staff the help and encouragement to take their first steps in medical research, while instilling the need for accuracy and rigor in data analysis. Richard made it his mission to improve people's understanding of the mechanics underlying research and this resulted in the award of the ICL President's Medal for Excellence in Research Support in 2020.

Beyond his scientific contribution, Richard was a long-standing member of the EBMT Statistics committee and developed an international reputation for teaching medical statistics. He brought the same passion to teaching and mentoring, making a daunting subject understandable and enjoyable. He regularly organised courses for the European School of Haematology (ESH) and the EBMT, which were attended by physicians, nurses and scientists from across the world, and so many times attendees commented on his ability to make statistics fun, interesting and an absolute necessity to their daily work. The Centre for Haematology at ICL benefited enormously from his input into undergraduate teaching, again making a dry subject fascinating, and many students were lucky to have him as their pastoral tutor.

But Richard was so much more than his scientific practice. A big personality who loved life. Outside ICL he worked as a professional photographer and for many years the walls of the Centre were decorated with his work, photographs taken from around the world, as he took every opportunity from his travels to medical meetings, to explore the world beyond the conference centre. His work moved beyond mere photography to works of art: he

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exhibited widely including at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions. He was an avid collector, some might say a hoarder, and amassed large collections of geological and biological specimens, vinyl records, Lego and wooden toys, prints, books and photographic equipment. He embraced life, travelled, climbed, skied, cycled, walked, foraged for mushrooms, played bridge, loved music, particularly Chopin, danced with the Mazury Dance Company for more than 30 years, sang with local choirs, was deeply involved with the Polish Scout Troup and had so many friends worldwide. He was proud of his Polish heritage and participated in all that the community valued, being a Council Member of the Polish Social and Cultural Association (POSK) in Hammersmith for 18 years. His Catholic faith was an integral part of his life and he lived the Christian values of kindness, honesty, loyalty and integrity. It was no surprise that he recently became Chair of the Governors of St George's Catholic Primary Voluntary Academy.

But if we could ask Richard for his proudest achievement, it would undoubtedly be his family. He married Blanka in 2012 and along came Tomek, Robert and Anna, all of whom he loved so dearly and deeply. He gave them his love of all things Polish and passed on his zest for life. Richard was unwell for the past two years, faced his illness with characteristic positivity and gratitude for the care he received and worked until the end, with some of his collaborators unaware of his medical problems. He will be much missed by family, friends and colleagues and long may the memory of that laugh, and of the joyous man behind it, linger.

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