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## **Professor Mary-Louise McLaws**

(17 March 1953 – 12 August 2023)

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# Communicable Diseases Intelligence

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## Notice to readers

# Professor Mary-Louise McLaws

(17 March 1953 – 12 August 2023)

It is with sorrow that CDI notes the passing of Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, aged 70, following a diagnosis of brain cancer. Professor of Epidemiology, Healthcare Infection and Infectious Disease Control at the University of New South Wales, Mary-Louise McLaws was also a leading spokesperson for public health education during the challenging conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor McLaws' connection to CDI is primarily as a co-author on the *Staphylococcus aureus* surveillance annual reports from 2005 to 2013, published in the journal between 2007 and 2013.

The journal invited several of Professor McLaws' colleagues and friends to contribute to an obituary:

Prof Mary-Louise, or ML as she was fondly known to her friends, was a global renowned epidemiologist who became Australia's go-to-expert during the COVID-19 pandemic. ML was able to translate complex scientific jargon to the public in a factual but calm and gentle manner. Throughout the pandemic, ML was so generous with her time - she was dedicated to the World Health Organization and supported several projects on infection prevention and control, she attended many meetings around the clock working long hours, she spoke at numerous conferences including the Australasian Medical Writers Association annual meeting. Despite this, ML still made time for media interviews and was committed to ensuring the public had access to timely and accurate information. We spoke for many years about the importance of science communication in outbreaks and how essential it was for researchers and academics to work with journalists and the media. I loved our long chats about everything IPC, WHO, science communication, world history, family and life, and most importantly over good coffee and Portuguese custard tarts. Family was everything to ML, she was a loving mother and devoted wife, and she welcomed so many of us into her home, so warmly into her circle of love. ML was my inspiration, my mentor and my dear friend, I miss her and she has left her footprint in my heart.

Jocelyne Basseal  
*Associate Director, Sydney Infectious Diseases Institute,  
Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney*

We all have fond memories of Mary Lou, but now also heavy hearts and ongoing sadness following her premature death.

I knew Mary Lou for over 30 years. Our association and friendship were fostered through many mutual interests. Especially when we both thought more prominence was needed for previously very underappreciated public health issues, such as infection control/prevention and antimicrobial resistance.

Mary Lou had many great attributes, but among her best was that she was such a great science communicator. This was not only to the benefit for us in academia and health related fields, but to the general Australian public, most recently with COVID-19. Mary Lou's views could differ to others, but part of her unique and lovable character was that she would listen to others, take in their views, and have honest and meaningful discussions.

Mary Lou had extensive involvement in academia, research, and public health guidelines. Not only in Australia, but globally, including with WHO in infection control and prevention. Her teaching, administrative and research expertise was appreciated not only here at UNSW, but especially in Asia.

Mary Lou will be missed by all of us. But her legacy, and the effects of her work, will continue through her many contributions to public health issues.

Peter Collignon  
*Infectious Diseases Physician and Microbiologist, Canberra Hospital  
Professor, Medical School, Australian National University*

It is with such sorrow to be writing an obituary for such an inspiring, knowledgeable and supportive leading lady. Long before COVID, Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, fondly known to many as ML, was a vision of grace, elegance and poise but above all just so knowledgeable and engaging. ML was always very giving of her time and expertise, nurturing us to light our own fires of passion for knowledge. More than a colleague for many, it is difficult to express the loss of ML into words, yet words were her wisdom! I may have been her last DrPH student, with her once telling me my words were too colloquial for academic writing—to which she had to explain “common or domestic”—and “*while my journey to complete is heavy without you ML, I will finish, and every day I will try and channel just a snippet of your wisdom and of you - ML*”. An amazing, accomplished and giving woman who has left a mark on so many, she was inspirational, setting new boundaries for Infection Prevention and Control. Almost unbelievable she is gone but will not be forgotten. Our collective hearts go out to her loving family and to all who knew her.

Kathy Dempsey  
*Chief Infection Prevention and Control Professional / Hospital Acquired Infection Advisor,  
Clinical Excellence Commission, NSW Health*

Prof Mary-Louise, for those of us very close to her ML, was an amazing person and an inspiration to many like me. I consider myself privileged to know ML, to have her as my PhD supervisor and very close friend, and later to walk a few steps with her during her unsullied journey. There are three strong women in my life who have influenced me, impacted massively on my career, and shaped me into who and where I am today. Unfortunately, I lost two of them, two years ago my mother and now ML. I am honoured to have experienced her leadership and guidance, and I will always admire her powerful and inspiring enthusiasm for teaching, her understanding of people from different ethnicities and culture, inclusiveness, and respect towards everyone. She was always the beacon of reason and eloquence, especially during the pandemic. Her relentless pursuit of disseminating evidence-based information to the public via media throughout the pandemic will not be forgotten, and many lives have been saved due to her skill to engage and encourage people across the world. The healthcare community and general population have been extremely well served by ML's knowledge, passion, and reassuring manner, and unfortunately the vacuum she left in our lives will not be filled.

Susan Jain  
*Principal Advisor / Research Lead, Infection Prevention and Control,  
Clinical Excellence Commission, NSW Health*

I first met Mary-Louise in 2008 when I moved to UNSW as Head of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine. She was one of the few people at the school doing infectious disease research, so I reached out to her before I started my role, and she came out to The National Centre for Immunisation Research at Children's Hospital at Westmead where I worked. I came to know her well during my decade in that role. She was an excellent epidemiologist, and convened courses on the subject in our Masters programs. I believe Prof Les Irwig had been her PhD supervisor at Sydney University, so she learnt from the best. She was also an expert in hand hygiene and worked with global leaders such as Didier Pitet, who was something of a mentor to her. She was a superb mentor to her students, and many of her PhD students formed lifelong relationships with her. She also excelled on the UNSW Academic Board. During SARS in 2003 she worked with Hong Kong research leaders like Prof Wing Seto on control of SARS. During the West African Ebola epidemic in 2014, we convened an Ebola infection control workshop, attended by many stakeholders from around Australia, several who were deploying to Sierra Leone. At that time few knew about Ebola or what precautions to take. Mary-Louise ran a session on hand hygiene at that workshop, with practical demonstrations using fluorescent gel, which was very engaging and delivered with her usual style and humour. During COVID she was a trusted and much loved voice of reason to the community. She was also something of a fashion icon – she had her own style, usually a fabulous matching handbag, and we often talked about handbags and compared handbag stories. Mary-Louise was taken from us too soon. It is a great loss to us, and even greater for her two children and husband.

Raina MacIntyre  
*Professor and Head of Biosecurity Program, Kirby Institute,  
University of New South Wales*

Since the death of Mary-Louise McLaws in early August, Australian and international media, scientific communities and leading public health agencies have been awash with obituaries and opinion pieces. None have highlighted the brilliance and importance of Mary-Lou's seminal work relating to infection control in Australia. Her contribution to early infection control deserves recognition and gives pause for reflection on what makes for a selfless life of public health contributions.

As Project Officer for the New South Wales Nosocomial Infection Outcome Indicator Project (1994–1995), and subsequently as her first PhD student (1995–1999), it was astounding to see the passion with which Mary-Lou sought to engage with and invest in Australia's Infection Control nurses.

As a non-clinician Mary-Lou brought fresh, clever, innovative but grounded perspectives on how infection control could and should make patient care safer. In 1984 Mary-Lou had designed, conducted, analysed and reported findings from the first national survey of the prevalence of nosocomial and community-acquired infections in Australian hospitals. From her survey of almost 30,000 healthcare consumers, Mary-Lou found the over-all adjusted prevalence of nosocomial infections was 6.3%. And so began Mary-Lou's lifelong professional quest to reduce the risk of healthcare acquired infections, not only in Australia but in several continents.

In the decade following the Nosocomial Infection Outcome Indicator Project, Mary-Lou engaged and lobbied directly with government, professional associations, nurses, doctors and consumers educating them, recruiting them, and ultimately winning their support for safer healthcare and fewer infections. Mary-Lou's mantra was "before we can prevent we must first know how many infections we cause". Her message in those years was often unpalatable and disturbing to government. Her passion was sometimes mistaken as being academically driven. Under her guidance, myself and several other nurses and allied healthcare professionals were given the opportunities to think critically, to question the status quo and to advance the science of infection control and prevention. Mary-Lou's drive never wavered, nor did her generosity in investing in future leaders. She was determined and dogged, perhaps never more so than in the 18 months following her diagnosis with a fatal brain tumour, when as an immunosuppressed patient her risks of infection escalated.

Without doubt, the world has lost one of the greats, perhaps the greatest, infection control and public health leader. As we stop to take stock of all she has left, we should take comfort knowing that almost 40 years after her seminal work, healthcare consumers in Australia and beyond experience fewer and less severe infections largely because of the passion and efforts of Mary-Lou McLaws AO. Thank you.

Cathryn Murphy  
*Independent Infection Control Consultant (Retired)*

There are people who go quietly about their business of changing the world, leaving their footprints, and making it a better place. Professor Emerita Mary-Louise McLaws AO spent decades translating science from her research into her teaching and in guiding communities in safe public health practices.

I feel I am in a very good position to speak about Mary-Louise as I have been her colleague in the School of Population Health at the UNSW and her close friend for over 30 years. Most mornings we would meet for a cuppa and discuss current university issues. We both had close insight into what was going on at our university. Mary-Louise was Deputy President of the Academic Board and knew very well what was transpiring across the university. I was Associate Dean of the Faculty of Medicine overseeing the postgraduate programs in Medicine. We are both epidemiologists conducting research in different public health arenas, with Mary-Louise focussed on infectious diseases, while I targeted smoking and excessive alcohol use.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mary-Louise provided evidence-based and important life-saving public health advice to Australians. In an assured manner, she provided us with evidence on public health initiatives. Mary-Louise played a major part in the fewer number of people being infected and hospitalised with this disease. With COVID, and SARS before it, she faced complex public health problems providing straightforward responses, dispelling the myths and exaggerations, within an ever-changing landscape. She presented us with the public health evidence available, explaining what to do to mitigate COVID, providing consistent messages like wear masks, wash hands, keep 1.5m from others, isolate if unwell and be vaccinated. This was our modus operandi by necessity for three years and we accepted this as part of everyday life and Mary-Louise's messages made us feel safe.

For many decades Mary-Louise advised governments, hospitals and other organisations, as well as our nation through our television screens. Indeed, in the troubled times of COVID, her considered and factual information and advice was invaluable to millions of Australians.

While we applaud Mary-Louise for her national and global public health initiatives, her teaching and supervision of public health students over many decades was greatly appreciated. She proudly supported PhD candidates throughout her career and focused on infection control in many countries including Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, Indonesia and others.

Robyn Richmond  
*Professor Emerita, Professor of Public Health, School of Population Health,  
University of New South Wales*

It is with the heaviest of hearts that I write an obituary for the person that taught me how to write. Detesting ramble and cluttered sentences, Prof demanded that words be used with the accuracy of a scalpel making a surgical incision. What an incredible honor to be supervised by one of the world's greatest academics. To Prof, a PhD was never about the finish line (although finishing was important), the most critical was the journey travelled; and Prof was well-travelled, making every PhD journey unique, challenging, exciting and unforgettable. Devoted to her students, Prof gracefully side-stepped from supervisor to a friend effortlessly, encouraging her students to fly from her nest with purpose and confidence. Her words were always carefully curated, penetrated deeply and continue to be heard. Prof epitomized bravery, style and grace, and her legacy will live on. Thank you for our travels together, our laughter and our tears. I miss you and us.

Sharon Salmon

*Technical Officer, Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network,  
WHO Health Emergencies Programme, World Health Organization*