

Good afternoon and welcome

Knowing how Kris was, I know he would be humbled by your presence here this afternoon.

My name is Keith Platel and I have had the pleasure of being Kris's financial adviser for the past 30 years or so. As many of you will have experienced, it is impossible to have known Kris for a period like that without developing a close friendship.

Reducing such a full and interesting life to a few minutes is an impossible task. I thought it would be easier because I thought I knew Kris quite well. Well I can say it hasn't been easy as I found that there was so much of his life and achievements that I didn't know.

Over the past few years the homework that I gave Kris was to write down his life history – beginning to end. His response was that no-one would be interested but, after many months of pestering, he delivered to me a copy of 2 articles which had been published. While extremely helpful, I was further assisted by one of Kris's colleagues, Dr Gus Gallea, in QLD. When I rang him to advise him of Kris's passing, he advised me that he and Kris had written each other's obituary – and he was kind enough to forward me a copy.

So what follows is an attempt to bring together information from various sources, embellished where possible by personal experience of me and others. I have attempted to remove most of the technical jargon – with limited success. By necessity, many of the words are those of others, including Kris.

By any standards a man who transcends even two cultures must be exceptional. The achievement of Krishna Somers was phenomenal. His roots were in India, his heart was in Africa, his mind was in Britain and America, and his feet finally came to rest in Perth, Western Australia.

Kris was born in Durban, South Africa, in a family of eight, all of whom other than his younger brother Sat, have predeceased him. He was a fourth-generation descendant of Indian sugar plantation labourers and, in his words, he and his siblings were raised in difficult days of poverty.

From his parents he inherited a fine intelligence, dogged persistence and enough ambition to project him into the heady post-Imperial and international scientific world, eager to catch up on the delays engendered by the world conflict.

Kris was a man of great handsomeness, an imposing presence with charming manners and a fluent and lively wit. He moved freely, and made contributions to circles where the sole entree was by excellence and intelligence.

He was raised in Durban during the decades of legislated racial discrimination, attending schools segregated for Indians. His whole life was a subtle but crushing rejoinder to that **rooi-nek** prejudice which so distempered his youth.

Yet, whereas a lesser man may have become embittered or lapsed into activist politics, Kris remained true to the humanist scientific ideal, and such was the strength of his optimism and inner resilience that he retained his love of that dark continent and its people whom he continued to serve even after being driven into exile.

Kris won a scholarship from Sastri College, Durban to the University of Witwatersrand from which he graduated as Craib Prizeman in 1950. Wits, as he affectionately called it, was the only university in the country at the time without racist admission policies.

To give you some idea of what Kris's days were like I would like to read some of his own words.

My own years at Medical School were my most formative years. Enrolling at Wits on a University scholarship was comforting, but my real trial was finding accommodation.

*During my first 6 months I lived at **Waterval Islamic Institute** which involved a daily commute.*

In subsequent months I stayed at a ghetto next to the white working class suburb of Mayfair. Here I shared a bed with two children of the household in a room which also served as a passage; there was no bathroom and the outside toilet was shared by the three families who lived in the small lot.

*I lived a subsequent year with friends in a location in **Benoni** which involved a long walk to the local railway station and a commute in a packed railway carriage to Johannesburg.*

*It was in my latter years, my clinical years, that I moved to a boarding house shared with two other medical students in an insalubrious part of **Doornfontein**, which provided acceptable accommodation and space to study without the challenge of knowing where I was to move for shelter and food.*

*As a South African of Indian origin I needed a permit issued by the Protector of Indian Immigrants, a **Certificate of Identity**, to enable me to travel from Natal and reside in the Transvaal during my student years. The permit had to be renewed every 6 months. The permit was withdrawn once I had finished my medical education.*

Lack of a permit also meant that I was unable to pursue internship in a province other than the province of my birth. Non-white state hospitals in the province of Natal still had white nursing staff and it would have been degrading for a white nurse to take instructions from a non white doctor.

I was obliged to join a small mission hospital in Durban which, for the first time, was prepared to appoint an intern.

However, upon graduation, Kris was unable to progress with his medical career. His words were: *“I found myself in the invidious position where I could never work or take further training because the teaching hospitals, which were government institutions, would not hire non-white doctors. It was just impossible”*.

So, after his internship in Durban, he transferred to the Central Middlesex Hospital in the UK where he caught the attention of Drs Horace Joules and Keith Ball. His academic career was securely launched and gathered increasing momentum, taking him to Great Ormond Street and the Royal Postgraduate Medical School.

By 1957 he was a Lecturer in the Department of Medicine, Makerere University, Uganda, rising steadily until he was appointed to a Personal Chair in Clinical Medicine in 1968. He established a productive program of research, publications and teaching. As the only medical school in East Africa, it attracted students from right across the region.

In 1962-63 a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship took him to the Cardiovascular Research Institute, University of California, San Francisco for training in Cardiovascular Physiology.

His excellence and skills were noted by men of power and he served as Consultant Physician to President Milton Obote of Uganda from 1958 to 1971. It was a prestigious appointment which he enjoyed very much. He finally fled Uganda in 1973 to escape the persecution of the notorious mad dictator Idi Amin. When I read this I was reminded of the film *The Last King of Scotland* and the tyranny which existed at that time.

Kris was by now an international figure and authority on his prime interests **Endomyocardial Fibrosis** and **cardiovascular disease in warm climates**.

After a brief period as World Health Organisation consultant in training and development at the University of Papua and New Guinea in 1973-74, he finally called a halt to his changing international academic postings and settled as an Associate Professor of Medicine to the University of Western Australia and Physician to the Royal Perth Hospital from 1974 to 1989. He was elected Emeritus Consultant Physician to the Royal Perth Hospital in 1990.

I am told that the early years in Perth were difficult for Kris – that he felt lonely and displaced. No doubt this period reinforced his concern for migrants and refugees and led to his lifelong contributions to try to ease their sufferings.

Krishna Somers was a gifted researcher, teacher, administrator and medical ambassador. He was a cultured, rounded Renaissance man who followed the **Santayana** doctrine of being mindful of one's history in order to avoid its repetition.

In his golden years he made pilgrimages to temples and shrines and wrote of his experiences with great sensitivity and perceptiveness to his many fortunate friends around the world.

He published about one hundred and thirty papers on cardiovascular topics. His special interest was **Endomyocardial Fibrosis** on which he was a world authority and innovator. His interests spanned from the paediatric to the geriatric. He published in a constellation of journals.

From history of folk medicine to computerised nuclear radio cardiography - Kris visited them all.

He was invited to contribute chapters to no fewer than eight books and was a joint author of a book on **Endomyocardial Fibrosis** published by Oxford University Press in 1993.

Kris acted as consultant to World Health Organisation on **cardiomyopathies** and medical training.

He was a Guest Lecturer, Fellow, Chairman of Symposia and Keynote Speaker at national and international meetings in most countries in the civilised, and not so civilised, world, including India, Japan, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, South America, Pakistan, Libya, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, Kenya, London and Boston.

He remained an Editorial Consultant to various journals.

As a teacher Krishna Somers was held in great affection and respect. His students found him exacting but fair. He taught postgraduates and organised and supervised undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in Internal Medicine and Cardiology.

He pioneered **cardiac catheterisation** and **intra-cardiac biopsy**.

At Royal Perth he taught undergraduates and postgraduates in the clinical disciplines of Internal Medicine and Cardiology.

He never forgot the ethical standards and clinical skills learned from the great teachers who flourished in Britain in the twilight of Empire from 1950 to 1970. His African experience honed and refined these skills to a level hardly comprehensible in today's technological world.

Kris had a particular love of Uganda and over the years Kris returned to South Africa and Uganda many times. He particularly enjoyed catching up with former students, many of whom now hold senior medical positions in various East African countries.

Kris was a sociable, outgoing person and was a great joiner of professional, social and cultural associations, making his unique contributions to bodies as esoteric as the Milligan Society of Perth.

He was associated with

- The Convocation and the Medical Graduates Association of his alma mater (Witwatersrand),
- the British Medical Association,
- the Royal Society of Medicine,
- the Royal Society of Physicians
- the Great Ormond Street Dining Club,
- the Royal Postgraduate Medical School of London,
- the Faculty of the History of Medicine,
- the Society of Apothecaries of London,
- the East African Academy
- the British Cardiac Society,
- the International Society for Research in Medical Education,
- the International Study Group for Research in Cardiac Metabolism,
- the Australian Medical Association,
- the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand,
- the Clinical Association Royal Perth Hospital,
- the Council on Cardio-myopathies
- the International Federation and Society of Cardiology.
- And, I am sure, several others

And, knowing Kris, he would have made an active contribution to each one. These contributions epitomise a lifetime of dedication and hard work.

Krishna never married. With all his activities and pursuits settling down to domesticity would have been confining, even stultifying. But he was the favourite house guest of half the world and the pampered dinner guest of the wife of every man.

Fortunately, Kris was able to continue working until very recently, notwithstanding a few interruptions caused by health issues. In his words again – *“Retirement **does** cross my mind, but what I do at the moment I enjoy immensely, and I like to think I do it reasonably well, so I continue.”*

His personal experience of struggling to find a country influenced his decision to provide seed funding for a foundation focused on researching diasporas — the Krishna Somers Foundation at Murdoch University. I have to admit that I had to look up what a diaspora is – and the best description I found was ***the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland***. Kris understood more deeply than most that sometimes this was by choice and sometimes forced.

Kris said *“I’ve always been interested in diasporas and social justice ... I hope that it can help contribute towards a greater understanding of society and why people move from one country to another”*

He believed immigration is inevitable. He said

“People move for various reasons. For instance, Australia has been involved in a senseless and useless war in Iraq, and likewise in Afghanistan. So we’re bound to create refugees from these countries.”

In his usual balanced manner he added

“But I wouldn’t be blatantly critical of Australia’s attitudes towards immigration. Australia is very generous.”

I hope that has given some further appreciation of the life of Professor Krishna Somers.

This wouldn’t be complete without a few words about the qualities of the man – the things which made him so special to each and everyone of us.

Mostly these are just a word or phrase – but each word will convey a rich meaning to each of us when we reflect on our personal relationship with Kris.

Words such as:

- Humble
- Generous
- Loyal
- Respected
- Quietly spoken
- Highly intelligent
- Innovative
- Widely travelled
- Humorous
- Gentle
- Gracious
- Frugal – obviously the result of poverty in his younger years
- And perhaps a little rebellious – this may seem a little strange to many of us but an extract from an article he wrote on his life history where he referred to the apartheid years while at Wits University gives a clue.
 - *“During the apartheid years in the late 1970’s I met up with an Australian colleague who had taken up a short term appointment in the Department of English. **She** chaperoned me and we swam together in the pool on the campus breaking all manner of rules and regulations”*

In recent years Kris had a few health issues. I am told by those close to him that during this time he never complained about his own health but remained concerned only for those others with whom he interacted.

His philosophy was most clearly stated in a letter to a friend and colleague where he described his thoughts on a procedure he had undergone

*A successful angioplasty with restoration of the calibre of the left main coronary artery is reassuring and I suppose it would be extremely fortunate if there is no recurrence of stenosis on the basis of something like a 50% risk. **No, I am not being morbid, I shall continue to work at a restricted pace and look forward to each day as a new day.***

That was 23 years ago and the pace was not so restricted!!

Thank you.

