

Putting his heart and soul into patient care

Cardiac perfusionist Lance Mitchell will be missed upon his retirement

By Jon Tattrie

Some people are perfect for their jobs. And Lance Mitchell certainly fit that bill.

Friends and colleagues are celebrating the work of a QEII Health Sciences Centre cardiac perfusionist, who was honoured with two humanitarian awards toward the end of a career that took him from Toronto to Halifax, with stops in Rwanda and China.

Cardiac surgeon Dr. David Horne says a perfusionist is as critical as his own right hand.

"I can't do any heart operations without a perfusionist," Dr. Horne says.

He compares the role to football.

"People always look at the surgeon as the quarterback and the quarterback is always the MVP at the Super Bowl. But they can't do that without the other players," he says.

A perfusionist plays a role like the football centre: snapping the ball on every play and protecting the quarterback so they can make that game-winning throw. Or in this case, life-saving surgery.

"You can't do heart surgery if the heart is beating. If the heart's not beating, the patient is dead," Dr. Horne explains.

Cardiac perfusionists solve this conundrum by taking over the heart and lung functions for the patient via a cardiopulmonary bypass, a heart-and-lung machine that keeps the blood and oxygen circulating through the body. A very specialized area of care, the perfusion team at the QEII participates in all heart transplants and major heart operations in Nova Scotia and many from Atlantic Canada.

Lance started his career as a Toronto paramedic in 1984. Tiring of the physical side of that job, he transitioned to a role as a perfusionist in 1991. He moved to the QEII in 1998 and served as team lead from 2013 to 2019.

He also served on missions to Rwanda and China to train perfusionists there in his life-saving craft. He was awarded the Canadian Society of Clinical Perfusion Humanitarian Award in December 2023. He was previously awarded the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal.

Lance says the awards are "huge" for him. He notes the Jubilee medal came about when he visited his former local MLA, Angela Simmonds, to get her to notarize his perfusionist licence



Lance Mitchell (left), retired QEII perfusionist, was presented with the Canadian Society of Clinical Perfusion Humanitarian Award by Roger Stanzel (right), QEII perfusion team lead, in recognition of his work on cardiac humanitarian missions in Rwanda and China. **CONTRIBUTED**

for his Rwanda trip. Angela was so impressed she nominated him for the award, which was presented to Lance at the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotians.

"It was a gratifying experience," Lance says.

He said the work itself favours a problem-solving approach to getting the job done with the tools you have.

"Sometimes you see a problem that arises a couple of times in your career and maybe the surgeon hasn't seen that problem before. You can problem-solve and help with a better outcome because of your experience."

He remembers surgeries where a cut caused more bleeding than expected and he, as the perfusionist, performed a life-saving role in infusing blood into the patient as the team staunched the bleeding.

Lance says the perfusionist field is highly competitive and landing a good job requires a

strong medical background, the ability to function within a busy environment, and calmness under pressure. You also generally need to work in a big city and live within 30 minutes of the hospital for the on-call component.

Roger Stanzel is the perfusionist team lead at the QEII and worked with Lance for many years. He says Lance played a key role in aligning perfusionists into pediatric and adult teams, which improved outcomes for children.

"Lance is a very humble, quiet guy. He puts his head down and makes things work," Roger says. "He'll never say, 'We can't do this.' He'll say, 'Here's a problem. We've got to go figure it out.'"

That was critical on the Rwanda trip, where local doctors routinely deal with power outages and supply shortages.

"Lance was instrumental in going on the working trips as the only perfusionist. He had to plan what needed to be taken, what

needed to be done, and how to get those things to Africa."

In Rwanda, he worked endlessly to source the tools they needed to do the job and to teach local perfusionists how to excel at it. He did similar work in China.

Roger says heart surgery is the "ultimate team sport" in medicine and they will sorely miss an all-star performer like Lance now that he's retired.

"He's one of those guys who's seen pretty rough situations and is as calm as a cucumber," Roger says. "He was always a step or two ahead and knew what needed to be done to get the patient to a safer place."

While now retired, Lance continues to work casually at the QEII and IWK, as well as sharing his talents in locum positions across the country to support cardiac surgeries that might otherwise be cancelled without a perfusionist.

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lining, it's that even in his death, he's able to create something so positive because he was so positive. His legacy won't be that negative stigma that you see with victims of suicide — it's going to be that positive change that is made for mental health."

Ryan plans to make the tournament an annual event

and he and others are already brainstorming ideas as to how to raise even more money and awareness next time.

Money raised at the inaugural tournament was donated to the QEII Foundation. Ryan is thrilled that funds are supporting the RBC Youth Health Innovation Challenge.

"We care about helping people with this money, so we are really happy with where the money has gone to support other people. Getting the Foundation involved was crucial for us because the

resources the QEII Foundation has can be instrumental in making it bigger and better than it was."

Speaking on behalf of the family, Joe's older sister Meg Keavill expressed her gratitude and appreciation to Ryan and others who helped plan the golf tournament in her brother's memory. When Ryan came to the family with the idea, they thought it was the perfect way to remember Joe and help other youth struggling with mental health issues.

"It means the world to us. It was so powerful to see so many people come out. It was good for his friends and the family to have something to focus on in a positive way following Joe's death," she says.

"The fact the money raised is going toward helping Nova Scotia youth with mental health problems is comforting."

Meg says it's meaningful to the family to know what they are doing is helping people who are struggling in silence, like Joe may have been.



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