

In Memory of Oliver Press, MD, PhD

We have lost a giant. For those of us who knew and worked with Oliver Press, it feels like a punch in the gut. Some individuals can be reliably identified by a single name, and “Ollie” was one of those guys. His home institution, the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, put out a wonderful tribute on its website. Until I read that piece, I did not know that Ollie had been born and raised in St Louis. I also did not know that his sister worked down the hall from me in our chemotherapy unit. I sought her out last week, to express my condolences and let her know how much her brother was respected in our world. It was not hard to identify Barbara Press—there is a strong family resemblance. I liked talking to her. It felt like talking to Ollie.

Here are a few excerpts from the October 2 tribute:

Oliver “Ollie” Press, M.D., Ph.D., a blood cancer physician who made foundational contributions to the development of targeted cancer therapies, died Friday of complications from glioma, a brain cancer. He was 65.

Press had an international reputation as a scientist and oncologist specializing in blood cancers, especially lymphoma. He was best known for his impact on the development of radioimmunotherapies, which direct high-powered radiation straight to tumors using cancer-targeting antibodies. He held a variety of leadership roles in his field and was known for his dedicated mentorship of younger investigators. His scientific impact spans the research spectrum, from fundamental science to large-scale clinical trials....

Press’ cancer radioimmunotherapy research, which began when he was a fellow at Fred Hutch in the 1980s, played a pivotal role in the strategy’s eventual Food and Drug Administration approval in the early 2000s. Clinical trials he led combining radioimmunotherapy and blood stem cell transplant have demonstrated some of the best long-term outcomes ever seen in certain kinds of blood cancers. Hundreds of patients have received radioimmunotherapy products created in his research labs, Press estimated in an interview earlier this year....

Press has also made fundamental contributions to other targeted blood cancer therapies. As a fellow, he led the first trial of an antibody specifically aimed at a molecule called CD20 on certain immune cells called B cells that can become cancerous in leukemias and lymphomas. That trial in lymphoma, published in 1987, was the first to demonstrate the feasibility of targeting this molecule with an antibody to treat cancers; today, CD20-targeted antibody-based drugs are a

mainstay of treatment for blood malignancies....

Widely recognized for his skill as a mentor, Press mentored 72 people at all stages of their careers, including many who are now themselves prominent in cancer research.... In February 2017, Fred Hutch unveiled the Oliver ‘Ollie’ W. Press Award for Extraordinary Mentorship, which was created by Press’ colleagues to honor his impact on patients and on cancer research.



I know that Ollie was a superb mentor. According to Ajay Gopal, MD, a colleague of Ollie’s at Fred Hutch, “Ollie was like an ‘academic dad’ to so many of us coming up through the ranks. He worked hard, was extremely successful on both translational and clinical research fronts, cared tremendously for his patients, and always cheerfully led by example. Working with and being mentored by Ollie was the most valuable element of my training, and by far the single most important reason I chose an academic career in lymphoma.”

I always thought Ollie was perhaps the most talented lymphoma investigator I had ever met. He was great at everything—a great doctor, great scientist, great teacher, great mentor, great administrator, and great person. Richard Fisher, MD, president and CEO of the Fox Chase Cancer Center, worked with Ollie for 25 years through their collaborations in SWOG and shared with me the following: “Ollie Press was a wonderful physician scientist in the truest sense of the word. He was a superb clinician who wanted to develop his translational laboratory results for the benefit of his patients. He was also a dedicated clinical trialist who led multiple important studies that advanced the care of patients with both Hodgkin and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. On a personal note, Ollie was always available to offer his wise counsel and to mentor younger faculty members. He was a totally reliable colleague who could be counted on to deliver his work accurately and on time. His humor and laugh still ring in my ears. He will be missed enormously by myself and the lymphoma community at large.”

Until next month ...

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brad S. Kahl". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Brad S. Kahl, MD