The sad death of Richard Burn-Murdoch, King's College, was announced in the previous issue. A memorial service, attended by staff, students and family, was held in Guy's chapel on 29th April. At that service a former colleague paid the following tribute.

It is now three months since we learnt of the tragic loss of one of our colleagues, Dick. Enough time to realise, if we hadn't before, how much we, his fellow staff, depended on him in so many ways in our work. A colleague of mine who shared a love of teaching, which was directed largely at pre-clinical dental students, he would have been 51 a week ago today. Although my few words focus on Dick from a colleague's viewpoint over 20 years, Dick's professional career started in 1967 when he joined Guy's as a Dental Student. He excelled academically, gaining prizes in Physiology and Anatomy, and went on to do an intercalated Anatomy BSc, obtaining a First. It was appropriate therefore that he maintained a close association with pre-clinical Physiology teaching and the BSc programme. Dick qualified as a dentist in 1974 and pursued his academic strengths as a Junior Lecturer in the Physiology Department at Guy's. His teaching and research (into tooth eruption mechanisms and which led to a PhD in 1979) continued to the end of his life. Despite moving to the St Thomas' campus with the formation of UMDS, and later the merger with King's and the move back to where he started his career, Dick remained loyal to his profession, his teaching and research and to his colleagues and students.

Dick dedicated himself to his work, a large part of which went unseen, and only revealed itself in the smooth running of the courses and programs that he organised. He was a willing volunteer, taking on a wide range of responsibilities in teaching and administration. In this respect he was not unique, but what set him apart from others was the extraordinary attention he gave to detail, and his ability to see what he was doing within the wider picture. On committees when it came to approval of minutes all faces would turn to him, for Dick was celebrated for picking up points that could easily have slipped the more superficial scrutiny of his colleagues. Although Dick sometimes complained whimsically that his memory was fading, he could recall how an item had progressed through the committee structure over several years, whereas lesser mortals would struggle to recall the last meeting.

Dick was a traditional chalk-and-blackboard, fountain pen-and-paper chap and would always opt for a note in flowing prose rather than a hasty e-mail, but he was no Luddite. His computer files were immaculately organised alongside his paper records. Together they bear witness to the extraordinary amount of time and effort that he must have put into his job.

Dick was very much a doer as well as an organiser of others. His main teaching centred on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems. and students will remember how he willingly provided his own blood for haematology demonstrations, or would swallow an oesophageal balloon to demonstrate...
pressure changes in breathing and talking, but there was no aspect of physiology that was beyond his range of competence. With such a broad expertise he was perfectly suited to organise and examine in systems-based courses which straddled the boundaries of the traditional pre-clinical sciences. He also gained legendary status, long before it was politically correct to offer handouts and lecture notes, Dick’s celebrated ‘major points’ handouts formed the core knowledge-base of his courses, and were among the first bits of course-support material that I was able to put on the web. Written in uncompromisingly good English prose, they were, and still are, a great comfort not only to students but to tutors who need to know what the students are meant to understand. He was happy to share the material worldwide, especially with those in countries such as Indonesia where access to textbooks was difficult.

At the regular focus groups where students air their views, Dick’s handouts were year-in year-out quoted as the ideal for other teachers to aspire to. He reviewed and updated them regularly as the latest information became available. Dick was not a gratuitous spoon-feeder though. He was uncompromising in applying standards and had a reputation as a tough but fair marker. If you second-marked Dick, or worse, if he second marked you, you knew you had a fight on your hands. To win him over to your suggested mark was an achievement to be proud of.

Dick was a private man in many ways, but was always willing to listen and help. He was generous of his time and efforts in his role of supervisor to two postgraduate students who I know appreciated all he did for them. Hardly a ‘party animal’, he nevertheless clearly enjoyed sharing the success of the students he taught and would always be an early arrival at post-examination celebrations in the Department. When term and exams were over and his huge burden of marking, collating and vivas was complete, Dick would disappear to mountainous areas at short notice. We all had a notion of the extent to which he pushed himself in his walking and cross country skiing ‘holidays’, but few of us can really imagine the solitude and isolation that he sought in sometimes hostile environments.

As a teacher Dick lived doing what he loved and as an outdoor person Dick died doing what he loved.

Jim McGarrick