

Loh: On the sudden passing of a health care superstar

A few days ago, this community unexpectedly and tragically lost one of its finest physicians.

The impact of Dr. Mark Starr's loss will be greatest for his family and his patients, but also for his colleagues. And I define colleagues in the broadest sense to include not only his fellow physicians, but the health care professionals who are the nurses, health care technicians and his office staff who had the privilege of working with him on a daily basis.

Many will recite his background and contributions to the local hospital, his service to the medical staff, his leadership in critical care, all of which will be in his debt for years to come. I leave those eulogies to others. I want to explain why his loss has affected me, and likely many of his peers, so personally.

It was just not the sudden news of a tragic death of a fellow physician decades before it was otherwise and inevitably due, but the profound hollowness that enveloped me. I was incredulous at first, hoping it was a mistaken rumor. But as the reality was confirmed, a palpable sense of personal loss emerged. Something was now gone, even though Dr. Starr and I have not worked closely together for several years.

I have known Dr. Starr for about three decades, coming on staff at [Los Robles Hospital](#) about the same time. We often consulted on the same critically ill patients. He was a big guy who rather filled a room with his physical presence.

But what I appreciated in this well-trained physician was not just his sine qua non clinical expertise, but his insight and willingness to say what he thought, popular or not. During my years of working with him during times of great change in the health care system and hospital politics, it was apparent to me that he had a nose for sorting out, shall I say, "inconsistencies" (the more descriptive and appropriate word is not likely to be printed) between what was purported to be true versus what was actually true.

Sometimes this was expressed a bit gruffly and indelicately, and did not always make him welcome in some circles, but he was usually correct. Well, at least I shared many of his opinions, which by definition, made him correct. With that attitude, he engaged the system and undoubtedly made it better, to the gain of all of who live here.

I honor all my colleagues for the arduous path taken to become a physician. Respect is something else. That has to be earned, usually under fire. That takes superb clinical skills, a sense of honor to do the right thing despite easier available paths, and courage to make tough decisions. Dr. Starr had my absolute respect. That subset of colleagues just got smaller, and that, it occurred to me, was the source of the hollowness I felt.

Due to an unavoidable commitment on the other side of the country, I will miss Dr. Starr's services Thursday morning. But I wanted to express to his family my personal appreciation of having known and worked with a special human being.

Godspeed Mark. Mensch. Super Starr.

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