Vale Associate Professor Helen O’Connor

Fellow Sports Dietitians Australia members, it is with much sadness that we pass on the news that one of the iconic leaders of our profession, Associate Professor Helen O’Connor, has passed away. This is devastating news for all of us. Helen realised some colleagues would be upset not to be told about the significance of her health issues, but she was grateful that confidences were kept to allow her to deal with things privately with her family.

Helen was a strong and significant leader of our profession, with incredible impact and reach. She was the inaugural President of Sports Dietitians Australia, from SDA’s inception in 1996 until she handed the reigns over to Karen Inge in 2000. Helen was a visionary in her role in setting up SDA. She recognised the importance of building this organisation on strong foundations to ensure it could grow and develop and continue to raise the profile of sports dietitians both within Australia and internationally, and the importance of sports nutrition within professional and community settings.

She believed strongly in collaboration and this was showed in her negotiations in the early days with DAA and SMA to ensure that the formation of SDA had the support of both organisations. Helen was highly ethical and her diligence before making any directional decisions was admirable. Helen had an ability to hear different perspectives and negotiate to come to a common ground without losing focus on the ultimate goal. This shows her strength as a true leader.

Above all Helen was generous in so many ways and her focus was all about others, and creating opportunities for her fellow dietitians. This was particularly evident with the Sydney Olympic Games and how she was able to facilitate the involvement of SDA members – giving them a career highlight, which to this day was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for so many. While many of us have brilliant ideas, it takes a person like Helen O’Connor to make them happen.

Stepping back from the SDA Presidency did not stop Helen from continuing to make important contributions to SDA, and many other sports nutrition professional activities beyond.

Many of you will recall her body composition management workshops during the SDA courses... she had a unique gift for converting highly scientific dialogue into captivating snippets of information; she told so many funny and memorable stories, specific to her audience – a gift she carried into her university teaching and research supervision. As a leader in our profession, she was the kind of person everyone would do anything for! She could be incredibly persuasive, in the nicest possible way.
Helen was extremely talented at combining clinical judgement and experience into research questions, testing theories and ideas thoroughly, and answering relevant questions on behalf of our profession. Many of those questions no doubt came from her own work in the trenches.

She was a pioneer of the profession, initiating performance nutrition services for the Sydney Swans back in 1986 and consulted to a number of other professional teams, including the Canterbury Bankstown Bulldogs for 25 years. She also supported countless athletes like world Champion boxers Kostya Tszyu and Jeff ‘the hitman’ Harding, and many elite athletes and teams including those at the NSW Institute of Sport. One of Helen’s claims to fame, as described in The Sydney Morning Herald...

Following his victory, viewers around the world listened as Harding publicly thanked O'Connor. "You don't normally hear athletes thanking their nutritionist" she says. "I nearly fell over. I felt really satisfied that I'd been able to provide him with advice which had a positive effect."

It’s fair to say that today, we are all benefitting from Helen’s work.

Uniquely, Helen had the beautiful combination of great clinical engagement as a highly regarded Sports Dietitian, alongside an academic perspective from her role at the University of Sydney. She maximised that combination as effectively as anyone could; conducting ground-breaking, highly relevant and meticulously designed research in sports nutrition, energy metabolism and weight management. She was involved in well over a hundred publications in journals, books and conference proceedings (not to mention many lay publications). As you will know, her recent major project work of assessing general nutrition and sports nutrition knowledge so that we can measure the impact of our work in sports, is incredibly valuable to us and will continue to shape our profession through the collaborative research Helen facilitated domestically and internationally. Helen invested significantly in this work over a decade, to provide the tools we’ve craved in the field. A similarly valuable passion of hers was the optimal utilisation of body composition measures among athletes.

Helen was a mentor to many of the current leaders in our profession and so many sports dietitians and students, past and present. Helen always had time for everyone. She took a personal approach with each individual and nurtured their specific gifts and talents in a way only Helen could, and again provided so many professional and career opportunities. She generously gave many of us our career start in sports dietetics.

She was a fierce advocate for the role of nutrition in sports, and her friendly, engaging and persuasive style worked wonders for representing what a great sports nutritionist or dietitian could bring to an athlete and to a sports program.

She recognised not only the physiological impact of nutrition on performance, but she also recognised and appreciated the psychological impact that the way in which nutrition
support is delivered, can impact on the ability of an athlete to perform at their best. She fought hard to ensure that nutrition support was delivered in a way that best suited the athlete’s long-term health and wellbeing, while helping them to achieve their own goals.

Helen passed away due to cancer, which unfortunately claims far too many great people. Her public funeral is on next Wednesday 22\textsuperscript{nd} Jan, 10.30am in Sydney. A recovery lunch will be held from 12 noon at Kareela Golf Club: 1 Bates Drive, Kareela (if you are coming to the lunch, please indicate here by Sunday for catering purposes). Helen requested that flowers not be sent and instead respects paid via a donation to ovarian cancer research, details of which will be made available at the funeral. On behalf of the profession, SDA will pass on our condolences to Helen’s family; husband Brad, and sons Nick (20) and Alex (16).