

Mike Wakelam, 1955-2020

From the Birmingham Press

Richard Lutz remembers Mike Wakelam, a major force in medical research who died suddenly of a suspected Covid-19 infection.



Photo: Keith Heppell

There are two things that occurred to me when I heard that Mike, a friend and neighbour in Birmingham, had died. The first was how he filled a room with enthusiasm. Whether talking about his role as a scientist, chatting about his family or rugby or rock and roll or his work in community development, he bubbled. He fizzed.

The second thing is how young he seemed, possibly because of this joyful grasp of the world. He was in his mid-sixties when he died last week, but at times, his sheer warm ebullience portrayed him as a man still in the flower of youth.

His career was a projectile upwards. After being rewarded his PhD in biochemistry, he eventually became a professor of molecular pharmacology at Birmingham University. Then in 2007, he began his long productive role as director of The Babraham Institute in Cambridge.

He would return to Birmingham weekly to see his wife Jane and their two sons. And on those weekends, I would see him pass my house on the way to the shops, moving quickly – he always moved so quickly – as he made his way up the street.

I can't possibly describe the complicated work he did. I'm a layman but it seemed so critical in the world of medicine. It had to do, among other things, with cell signalling and how that affects the body – especially in ageing and the immune system.

He held honorary professorships at the universities of Birmingham and Cambridge and was a visiting professor at King's College London. He was sincerely dedicated to medical research: *"I love my work. I truly do,"* he would tell me over the years. The Institute wrote an elegant obituary adding: *"His loss will be felt widely across the scientific community and by all those who knew him"*.

I knew him. One of the last times I saw him was on a village hall dance floor with Jane. Mike was a wildly enthusiastic dancer, glee written on his face as he whirled around the room, a joy glowing from him. That was how Mike engaged with the world, his world of family, science, local community politics and the spinning world of ideas.

He will be missed by his family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. His death is a loss.

