

Mover of mountains

Author Gabriella Kelly-Davies on her biography of pain pioneer Dr Michael Cousins



Gabriella Kelly-Davies at her Mosman home. Picture: John Appleyard

At the beginning of National Pain Week, the national advocacy body PainAustralia launched my biography of Dr Michael Cousins AO, a trailblazing Australian pain medicine pioneer from Sydney's north shore.

Breaking Through the Pain Barrier: The Extraordinary Life of Dr Michael J. Cousins, explores the way historic events and larger forces shaped Dr Cousins and how he in turn shaped international pain research, treatment and policy.

The biography also highlights the personality traits that enabled Dr Cousins to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges and accept countless personal sacrifices in pursuit of his quest.

One Saturday night in 1964 as a junior doctor, Michael Cousins saw two critically burned boys limp into a Sydney hospital begging for help. He saved their lives but struggled to reduce their suffering because few pain treatments existed back then. That weekend Michael Cousins dedicated his life to reducing suffering by improving the treatment of pain.

In 1990, Dr Cousins set up the pain centre at Royal North Shore Hospital. From humble beginnings, his centre rose to international fame and pain centres around the world modelled their facilities on his innovative blueprint. In 2014, the hospital named it 'The Michael J. Cousins Pain Management and Research Centre'.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. At first, 'Prof' as colleagues and patients fondly called him, 'made do' with

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whatever space he could squeeze from the hospital's administrators — the pain clinic occupied the leaky veranda of an old building. He recalls the struggle to secure enough funding meant that at the beginning the pain centre was understaffed and team members felt "continually beleaguered", as though they "worked on a half-empty tank — sometimes even an empty tank".

Despite the somewhat ramshackle accommodation and understaffing, the mood at the pain centre was optimistic.

"Everyone knew they were pioneers in the nascent field of pain medicine," Dr Cousins says.

Over the years, Dr Cousins' negotiating skills became legendary as he gently guided government bureaucrats and hospital administrators into decisions they hadn't realised they needed to make. And those decisions usually involved funding pain management services for the one in five Australians who live with chronic pain.

Michael Cousins gave me my life back in 2005 after two decades of crippling migraines. On my 24th birthday, some thugs pushed me off my bicycle from their speeding car. The force of impact was so strong it propelled me into the air, and I landed on my head before rolling headfirst down the road. That day heralded the onset of a life of daily migraines.

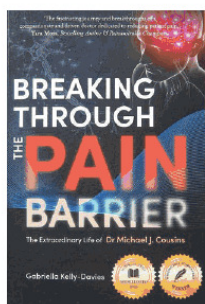
What followed was over a decade of Dr Cousins trying every possible treatment to manage my migraines. I sensed his determination in the way he persevered, even when my migraines didn't

respond to treatment. When we finally had a small breakthrough, I felt as if he had given me my life back.

In *Breaking Through the Pain Barrier* my story and the stories of some of Dr Cousins' many patients from across Sydney's north shore and eastern suburbs are woven into the narrative



Thugs pushed me off my bicycle from their car ... it heralded the onset of daily migraines



to show how his progressive treatment approaches improved our lives.

As Michael Cousins' patient, I risked writing a hagiography, a biography that idealises its subject. This risk was uppermost in my mind every day. I was determined that after reading the book, no-one would accuse me of being under Michael's

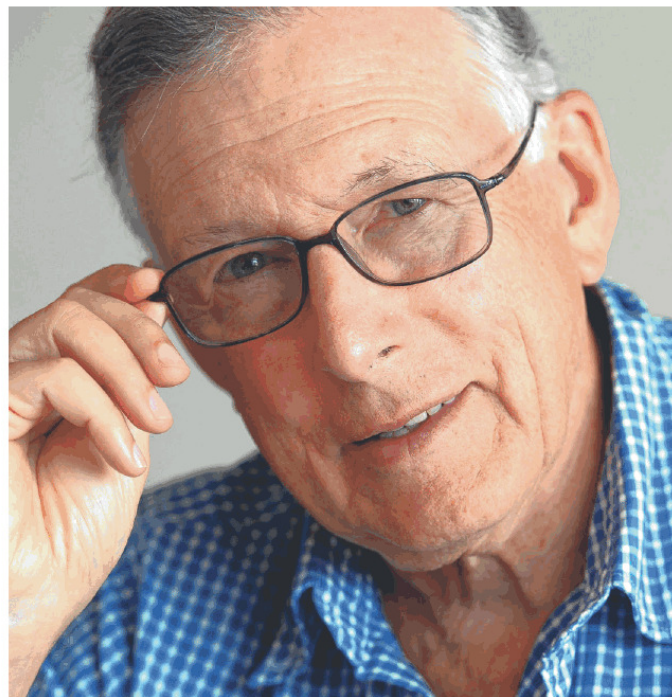
spell. I'll leave it to you to decide whether I've achieved my aim.

It was Michael Cousins' perseverance, combined with his compassion and kindness, that inspired me to write his biography. I also wanted to show how an individual with vision, determination and courage can move mountains to improve the human condition despite the personal toll, roadblocks and crushing disappointments along the way.

Michael Cousins and his wife Michele generously opened their home to me every Wednesday afternoon for months on end until Covid-19 hit, and we convened using Facetime. Our weekly interviews felt like we were reliving the memoir Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom. Michael patiently answered my hundreds of questions and provided me with access to his private archives and photo albums. He also opened doors to the pain world, introducing me to people across the globe who, like him, had shaped pain management as we know it today.

For several decades, Michael Cousins led the pain world. Through nearly 50 years of research, he advanced pain treatments such as epidural analgesia and spinal cord stimulation to relieve lower back pain. He designed Australia's National Pain Strategy that several countries replicated, and he was the driving force behind the creation of Pain Australia, which developed and is implementing the National Pain Strategy's action plan.

Still, Michael Cousins maintains that to ensure all Australians who live with



chronic pain can access specialist pain services, federal and state governments must fund the rollout of multidisciplinary pain management across the country. "We need a sustainable funding model," he says, his four-decade long battle cry.

A passionate advocate for people living with chronic pain, Michael Cousins tirelessly crusaded to destigmatise the condition. Through his relentless advocacy he also persuaded governments and organisations internationally to accept access to pain management as a fundamental human right.

In the 1670s Sir Isaac Newton wrote in a letter to his friend Robert Hooke, "If I

have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants".

While writing the biography I often thought about this statement. I thought that by examining the life of a giant like Michael Cousins, I might inspire people who were searching for their own way of making a difference in the world to forge ahead despite professional jealousy, inertia and immense personal sacrifice.

I hope *Breaking Through the Pain Barrier* will inspire anyone who longs to bring about change. I also hope it will intrigue those curious about reaching the heights of human endeavour. There are many books written about climbers of the tallest

Professor Michael Cousins pictured in 2014. Inset: *Breaking Through the Pain Barrier: The Extraordinary Life of Dr Michael Cousins*, by author Gabriella Kelly-Davies, a chronic pain sufferer herself. Picture: John Appleyard

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peaks, but there is also much to learn from studying those who have climbed mountains of inertia and changed societal and cultural responses to how our own bodies are treated by fellow human beings.

Michael Cousins' biography shows how one person with vision, compassion, indefatigable energy and an almost superhuman determination can move mountains to bring about reform that benefits millions of people.

I hope the book inspires the 3.24 million Australians living with chronic pain as they hear the stories of people like them who Michael Cousins helped. He restored their hope and, in many cases, saved their life after decades of living in intolerable pain.

I'm donating a portion of the proceeds from book sales to pain research to enable Australia's world-class researchers to continue Dr Cousins' groundbreaking work. I'm also hoping the book will provide a platform for me to continue his advocacy for people living with

pain. While governments must provide more funding for pain management services, all of us can play a part in reducing the stigma and social isolation of chronic pain by embracing compassion, empathy and acceptance of one another.

In closing, it's probably best to let one of Michael Cousins' patients articulate his legacy because his lifelong quest was to reduce their suffering by improving the treatment of pain.

Symantha Liu's most vivid memory of Dr Cousins involves a hospital ward and a tuxedo. She'd been suffering with a cluster migraine for days when the pain became unbearable. Dr Cousins admitted her to Royal North Shore Hospital for care and observation, and at one point, the pain was so bad she begged the nursing staff to "just knock me out". Symantha was vomiting, dehydrated and sobbing from the pain.

"The migraine was impacting my vision, and I'd never felt so vulnerable," she said. "I thought death would be better."



Gabriella Kelly-Davies suffered years of migraines and was helped by Dr Michael J Cousins. Picture: John Appleyard

A little while later, Symantha felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and heard a soft voice say: "Sam, it's me, Michael Cousins".

Through her tearstained eyes and blotchy vision, she struggled to make him out. Slowly a man wearing a dashing dinner jacket and with dapper silver hair came into view. He was almost luminous, and in her state one thought came to mind.

"Am I dead, Michael? Is it really you?"

Dr Cousins giggled quietly and told Symantha he was still beside her and not to worry. She asked him why the hospital had disturbed him, if he had somewhere important to be.

"Whenever I feel one of my patients has reached a migraine crisis, I can only feel better if I lay eyes on them for my own peace of mind," he said.

Symantha says this is the measure of the man. "For me, forever, a saint on earth."

Breaking Through the Pain Barrier is available in bookstores, libraries and from hawkeyebooks.com.au

mosman.nsw.gov.au

Solar My House

Thursday 5 August, 6.30-7.45pm, online via Zoom
Thinking about installing solar? Join us for a free online information session to find out how it works. The session will cover both rooftop solar and batteries. Bookings essential, visit events.humanitix.com/solar-information-session-thu-5-aug

Reducing waste

Thursday 26 August, 6.30pm, online via Zoom
Join our free, interactive Rethink Waste (for Good) workshop with co-founder, Good for the Hood, Jo Taranto. The workshop covers the circular economy, what it is and how it works, the five circular business models and ways we can incorporate the circular economy into our community. Bookings essential, visit eventbrite.com.au/e/161564316219

Library

Barry O'Keefe Library, 605 Military Road, Mosman 9978 4091 | mosmansnsw.gov.au/library
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Storytime and Babytime online

Join us live on Mosman Library Facebook for an online rhyme and story session with Storytime for ages 1-5 years and Babytime for ages 0-1 years. Storytime on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10.30am. Babytime on Wednesdays at 10.30am.

Overcoming anxiety and burnout

Friday 20 August, 10.30-11.30am, online via Zoom
Join us for a free illustrated talk on overcoming anxiety and burnout in a time of change with Sophie Scott for National Science Week. Sophie Scott is an award-winning ABC medical reporter with a special focus on medical research and patient safety investigations. Bookings essential, visit events.mosmansnsw.gov.au

ArtGallery

Mosman Art Gallery, 1 Art Gallery Way, Mosman 9978 4178 | mosmanartgallery.org.au
Mosman Art Gallery will be closed until further notice, exhibitions will recommence once the Gallery re-opens. View our historically significant collections online including the Mosman Art Prize, The Bahaves Gift and ATTACK. The collections showcase the diverse creative talents of past and contemporary Australian artists.

Mosman Art Prize - Call for entries

Due to Sydney's lockdown, changes are being made to the entry and judging processes for the 2021 Prize, including extending the closing date for entries. More information will be announced soon on the Gallery website, visit mosmanartgallery.org.au

Art Explorers online

While the Gallery is closed our popular Art Explorers program is available at home via video. This program provides engaging art making activities for kids aged 3-5 years taught by our art educator Emily. View online at facebook.com/mosmanartgallery/videos

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Free drop off

Sunday 29 August, 9am - 4pm
Mosman Square Car Park, The Crescent

Products accepted

Computers, laptops, monitors, TVs, DVD/CD/VHS media and players, printers, small electricals, mobile phones, game consoles, microwaves, light bulbs and computer peripherals - devices that connect to a computer or TV. For security, data should be cleared from devices.

Products NOT accepted

Whitegoods, cracked or broken monitors/TV screens, contaminated equipment or other hazardous waste.

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Enquiries call the Waste Team 9978 4000



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