IN MEMORIAM

Michael W. Kita, M.D.
1949-1998

It is with great sadness that this issue contains an obituary to Michael “Mike” Kita. The several parts of this notice are written by his friends, his professional colleagues and industry peers. I had known Mike since we were both invited to join the editorial board of this journal in 1990. Issue by issue, through his "p and q" contributions, I came to understand his great intellect and his ability to communicate to others. I was pleased when John Elder honored his contributions with the eponymous Editorial Award. Mike was of great help to me when I had to determine whether or not to accept the offer to become journal editor in the latter part of 1996. As an associate editor, he critically discussed articles which I have written on many occasions. Not only have I relied on his judgement but have benefited from his wisdom and above all his friendship.

I visited him in Portland, just before the start of his illness. In a typical way, he picked me up from the hotel and then to our first stop, namely the coffee kiosk. There fortified for the day, we spent it with his co-authors of Medical Risks: 1991 Compendium of Mortality and Morbidity, namely Dick Singer and John Avery. My editorial colleagues and I extend our deepest sympathy and condolences to Jeanne, his wife, Rebecca, his daughter and Jonathan, their son.

Nigel K. Roberts, M.D.

Dick Singer who this spring was asked by Mike to write his obituary, in return for Mike writing Dick’s, writes: "Bonds of friendship and intellectual kinship—these were for me firmly established with Mike Kita at our very first meeting. Our encounter was in May, 1990, on the occasion of the first Advanced Mortality Methodology Seminar, held in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Seven experienced medical directors participated in this first seminar aimed at fostering the production of Mortality Abstracts for the Journal of Insurance Medicine. Although each participant was a medical director distinguished in his own right, Mike Kita immediately impressed me with his qualities of warm friendship and his extraordinary aptitude for the application of life table methodology in the preparation of mortality abstracts. He was an outstanding, well prepared, and articulate participant. Our close relationship as colleagues seeking to advance the art and science of life insurance medicine was cemented when he enthusiastically proposed that the next seminar be held in Portland, near his company, UNUM, the following year, and he took on the duties of registrar to expedite the process. In addition to this contact at seminars, Mike and I and John Avery (director of CMAS) soon began a close association as a working subcommittee of the Mortality and Morbidity Committee of AAIM, the American Academy of Insurance Medicine. This personal reminiscence of Mike is based on the countless meetings of the Subcommittee, meetings he hosted at UNUM, on our joint conducting of seminars, and on may other contacts from 1990 to the summer of 1998.

Mike’s talents as a creative writer of scientific
articles were matched by boundless energy and administrative abilities that he utilized on behalf of AAIM and his company, UNUM, which has maintained a large a diversified Medical Department focused on disability insurance. As Chairman of the Mortality and Morbidity Committee he participated in the meetings of the Academy’s Executive Council, and worked to further various research projects. This was in addition to his work since 1991 as Associate Editor of the Journal of Insurance Medicine, to which he and other members of AAIM have devoted a great deal of effort. Recently he assumed a task as Associate Editor of the fourth edition of the Brackenridge and Elder text, Medical Selection of Life Risks. He also contributed chapters to both the third and fourth editions.

As working member of our Subcommittee, Mike as co-editor of Medical Risks - 1991 Compend of Mortality and Morbidity, published in 1994, and co-author of A Descriptive Index of Selected Sources of Mortality Follow-up Studies, 1951-1995, due for publication by the end of 1998. In addition to the planning work and Chapter text produced for these books, Mike was a prolific, inventive and entertaining contributor to the Journal of Insurance Medicine. If my count is correct he wrote no less than 23 articles prior to and during his editorship. Many of these were educational commentaries on the construction of mortality abstracts in the issue in which the commentary appeared. Mike attached to this series the whimsical title, “Minding Your P’s and Q’s.” The other were mortality abstracts or thoughtful articles on methodology or the general process of developing mortality abstracts. In our Subcommittee discussions he was full of insights and constructive ideas for the projects we engaged in. In the years that I knew him, Mike had a prodigious output of work in education, writing and research, despite the mounting pressure of his professional and administrative duties at UNUM. Among these were at least half a dozen strenuous trips to Japan on company business.

Mike was the type of person whose friends always enjoyed the warmth of his presence. I envisage that, when he was in practice prior to entering life insurance medicine, he was physician beloved by his patients, as William Osler and other ideal physicians were and are. Mike was devoted to his family, to his church, and to avocations such as distance running. In the months of his terminal illness he faced the outcome with extraordinary courage. His concern was never for himself, but for the concern and feelings of his friends, and he always sought to reassure them. As one privileged to have been a friend of Mike’s I will sorely miss him, treasure my memories of him, and lament the loss of his future years of fruitful life, so abruptly cut short.

Richard B. Singer, M.D.

Mark Batista, the Chief Medical Director and Senior Vice President of UNUM said, in his funeral oration, “We all have lost a giant of a friend and a great person, and we are lucky to have had him in our lives. He was a prodigious and brilliant consultant, teacher, mentor and statistical guru, and contributed so much to our company, our community, and the broader world of insurance medicine.” To go on in Mark’s words, “In preparing to give an eulogy at Michael’s memorial service, I asked many of his friends to share with me the essence of the memories they will cherish. Here are some words which will capture the essence:

“Playfulness, ability to be completely ridiculous, a class act in the roasts he did.”

“His hats - and his way of not noticing no one wore one.”

“The green, white polka dotted tie that went to the floor that he wore all day his first St. Patrick’s Day at UNUM.”

“How nobly Mike and Jeanne faced his illness and made others feel at ease, when by all rights it should have been the other way around.”
"His deadpan routines."

"Uniting his love for people and his, unquenchable curiosity."

"Kita-sensei "We may think we are alone, but in the shadow of time we are all one."

"His awesome sense of humor has warmed so may of us over the years."

Mike had been looking all over St. Petersburg for a Russian sailor's jersey. He found one and wore it all around. He was down by the docks when an older American couple spied him and approached. They asked him in very slow, loud English, "May we take your picture", Mike nodded. They then asked if he would "Stand..over..there" and again Mike nodded affirmation, after the picture taking, the couple asked, "Where..are..you..from", obviously expecting Siberia, Mike replied, "I'm from Maine, what about yourselves?"

The morning Michael died, one of his UNUM friends noticed the cloud formation. Many of you know Michael used clouds to support his meditation. That day, they were not long and lazy, not quiet and puffy. Rather, the clouds were scalloped, like smiles, and like waves of the ocean, which was another source of peace for Michael. She viewed the clouds as representing the entrance into heaven of a truly dynamic, radiant and energized person, and that he was being greeted enthusiastically by millions of smiles.

Mark Battista, M.D., J.D.

Pete Bell, a former student, colleague and friend writes:

"I count myself privileged to have known Michael. As I grieve his passing, I find myself drawn back to those times we shared. Undoubtedly others will bring to our remembrance, his brilliance, genius, and the contribution he made to our profession. Indeed, he was all of that. But the memories that I cherish are not those, for you see, mine are of those of my friend.

Michael and I were not especially close. For instance, we rarely socialized outside of work and our families knew each other only by what Mike and I told them about each other. Yet, Mike and I shared a bond that is unlike any other that I have known.

From the beginning, I should have known that ours would be a special relationship. We first met ten years ago when I interviewed for my current job. At the time our medical department was quite small' three physicians and two nurses. Michael had been here for two years, and was already showing brilliance that in later years would be evident to people all over the world.

I had been interviewing all day with various members of the staff and was scheduled to complete the day at two o'clock with him. What I remember most was how magical that afternoon with him was. It was as if we had known each other all our lives, rather than having just met, We so completely lost track of time, that at seven p.m. his wife called wondering when he would be home for supper. I dare say I had some explaining to do that evening myself.

That was but the first of innumerable conversations we enjoyed over the years, some lasting that long, others very brief, yet each as magical as the first.

Michael could converse authoritatively on any topic, from astronomy to Broadway plays, from quantum physics to Japanese culture. He had me awe of his medical knowledge. I know he had forgotten more medicine that I ever learned, yet in talking with him he never let on that we was aware how little I knew.

Michael had a childlike exuberance for life. Every day was filled with discovery, joy and surprise.
A few years back he was the Chief of our department and in that role he was called upon to make a business trip to Japan and Australia. During this two week trip he left me in charge. Halfway through I took it upon myself to send him a fax, letting him know all was well back home. Thinking I could send it to the hotel where he was staying I contacted our corporate travel agent. Much to my surprise I learned he was spending the night in Beijing China. It seems he had found a 24 hour window in his itinerary between Japan and Australia and decided it was just the time for him to visit the Great Wall of China. Upon his return he regaled us all with his story of Beijing: the taxi ride to the Great Wall, his inability to speak Chinese and with only minutes to spare his scramble to retrieve his airline ticket from a travel agent on the other side of the city from his airport.

Michael would not and could not live life any other way. He was my mentor, boss, colleague and friend.

I miss him.

Paul "Pete" Bell, M.D.