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CAVE RESCUE HERO RECEIVES AMA GOLD MEDAL

AMA Gold Medal
2019 AMA NATIONAL CONFERENCE - #amanatcon
Sofitel Brisbane, 24-26 May 2019

Dr Richard Harris, the Adelaide anaesthetist who played a crucial role in rescuing 12 Thai boys and their soccer coach from a flooded cave last year, has been awarded the prestigious AMA Gold Medal.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, made the announcement at the AMA National Conference tonight.

“Dr Harris’s credentials to receive the AMA Gold Medal are self-evident,” Dr Bartone said.

“In all aspects of his career, he has displayed all the attributes of the best of the medical profession – compassion, dedication, and excellence.

“His contributions to the medical profession, to emergency services, and to humanitarian work would be enough on their own to warrant recognition.

“Dr Harris worked with AusAID in the Pacific for two years, providing anaesthesia and intensive care services in Vanuatu’s developing medical system.

“His love of diving led him into the field of hyperbaric medicine, and into search and rescue operations. Dr Harris established Australasia’s first sump rescue training course, and has built strong relationships with emergency services.

“Dr Harris became the centre of world attention in 2018 when he and his dive partner, veterinarian Craig Challen, took part in the heroic and dangerous rescue of the Wild Boars soccer team after 17 days trapped in Thailand’s Tham Luang cave system.

“A Thai Navy SEAL had already died during the dangerous mission, and Dr Harris and the other rescuers risked their lives to swim, walk, and crawl to reach the boys.

“Dr Harris assessed the boys medically, and determined the order in which they should be helped out.

“Crucially, he used his anaesthetics expertise to sedate the boys with ketamin before divers guided them unconscious through the treacherous cave system, as there was a real danger that the boys might panic during the three hours of diving and swimming through narrow passages, and put themselves and their rescuers in danger.

“The priority of doctors is ‘first, do no harm’. I can only imagine the range of emotions Dr Harris must have felt as he submerged that first unconscious boy to test the full face mask that would be used in the operation.

“It took three days to bring all 12 boys and their coach out of the cave. With the world watching, Dr Harris was the last person out.

“Dr Harris is the 2019 Australian of the Year for South Australia, and the joint Australian of the Year with Dr Challen. He has been awarded Australia’s second-highest civilian bravery award, the Star of Courage (SC), the medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), and has been granted royal honours by the King of Thailand.

“Dr Richard Harris is truly a worthy winner of the AMA Gold Medal.”

25 May 2019

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AMA GOLD MEDAL FULL CITATION

DR RICHARD HARRIS SC OAM MBBS, FANZCA

Dr Richard Harris's credentials to receive the AMA Gold Medal are self-evident. In all aspects of his career, he has displayed all the attributes of the best of the medical profession – compassion, dedication, and excellence.

As an anaesthetist and an underwater explorer, Dr Harris's contributions to the medical profession, to emergency services, and to humanitarian work would be enough on their own to warrant recognition.

Dr Harris worked with AusAID in the Pacific for two years, providing anaesthesia and intensive care services in Vanuatu's developing medical system, and also honing his diving skills.

His love of diving led him into the field of hyperbaric medicine, and into search and rescue operations. Dr Harris established Australasia's first sump rescue training course, and has built strong relationships with emergency services.

He also works at South Australia's emergency medical retrieval service (MedSTAR) as an aeromedical consultant, caring for critically ill patients in remote and austere environments.

In his spare time, he has worked on National Geographic documentaries and feature films as a diver, underwater camera operator, and medical support.

In 2011, he was one of the expert cave divers called in by South Australian police to recover the body of his friend and fellow diver, Agnes Milowka, who had run out of air in the eight-kilometre-long Tank Cave, near Mt Gambier.

But Dr Harris became the centre of world attention in 2018 when he and his dive partner, veterinarian Craig Challen, assisted in the rescue of 12 children and their soccer coach trapped in Thailand's Tham Luang cave system for 17 days.

A Thai Navy SEAL had already died during the dangerous mission, and Dr Harris and the other rescuers risked their lives to swim, walk, and crawl to reach the boys.

Dr Harris assessed the boys medically, and determined the order in which they should be helped out.

The anaesthetist played the crucial role of sedating the boys with ketamin, so that they did not panic during the three-hour dive-and-swim out of the cave.

Dr Harris has spoken of the difficult emotions he felt as he submerged the face of the first unconscious child to test the full face mask that would be used in the operation.

It took three days to bring all 12 boys and their coach out of the cave. With the world watching, Dr Harris was the last person out.

Since his heroic role, Dr Harris has been named South Australia's Australian of the Year, and the joint Australian of the Year with Dr Challen. He has been awarded Australia's second-highest civilian bravery award, the Star of Courage (SC), the medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), and has been granted royal honours by the King of Thailand.

Dr Richard Harris is truly a worthy winner of the AMA Gold Medal.