

Love and sacrifice in the time of COVID-19



By [Jewel Topsfield](#) (Melbourne Editor of "The Age")

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After 26 years of living with his wife, Mark Cullinan moved out of the family home last week.

"It sounds awful to say this, but Mark said 'I'm the biggest threat to this family'," Mr Cullinan's wife, Nicole says.

Mr Cullinan is a general surgeon, who some days travels between three Melbourne hospitals.



Nicole Cullinan, her 4 children from LEFT TO RIGHT Sophie 19 years old, Faith 16 years old, Tom, 21 years old, Bella 23 years old and dog Frenchie at their Melbourne home *Credit: Penny Stephens*

The couple was concerned about the shortage of personal protective equipment in hospitals and mindful that in Italy healthcare workers make up about 10 per cent of COVID-19 cases.

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Mr Cullinan knew health workers from The Alfred hospital who had contracted the virus.

"Sadly I think there is almost an acceptance among health care workers that a lot of them are going to get it," Ms Cullinan says.

The Cullinans had a family meeting. "It was not all Brady Bunch but we came to some agreement. Our best defence is to stay home for the next three months. And Mark said: 'I think I have to move out'."

Mr Cullinan is now living at his parents' beach holiday house, an hour's commute away.

Ms Cullinan spent the days before his departure preparing. She hid a love letter in Mr Cullinan's suitcase. She made single portions of his favourite meals which could be frozen. And she recorded herself reading the first chapter of *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, a novel of existential romance by Japanese author Haruki Murakami.

"Mark said he liked hearing my voice before he goes to sleep," Ms Cullinan says. "He texted me in the middle of the night saying 'I can't get to sleep' so I said: 'Listen to this'."

Ms Cullinan says she feels a "calm sense of sadness, unsure of what is yet to come".

"There is a small amount of relief in moving a big risk from our house but a profound sadness he is not with us anymore," she says.

Mr Cullinan tells her there is camaraderie between health workers, who are checking in on each other and asking if they are OK.

They know of other medical staff who are making similar sacrifices; quarantining themselves from their families in separate bedrooms and bathrooms, although they are among the first in their circle to live separately.

Meanwhile, Ms Cullinan and her four children, who are aged between 16 and 23, are playing a lot of board games and doing jigsaw puzzles.

"They have been really supportive - they are very committed to supporting Mark in this. The challenges are more emotional. They are saying things like: 'Do you think Dad will be alright?' and because they are adults I say: 'I hope so'. It's just that low-grade worry all of us are living with."

Mr Cullinan performed operations over the weekend for a colleague who was being tested for COVID-19. "He's already been working his guts out, doing double hours. If there are less and less workers there is more and more work to do."

If there is one message Ms Cullinan hopes will come out of her family's sacrifice, it's for those who can stay at home to do so.

"I really don't want the medical health system to be overwhelmed," she says. "I find myself constantly saying 'We are all in this together'."