



Dr. Victoria E. Johnson

September 4, 2025

It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Dr. Victoria E. Johnson, MBChB, PhD, Associate Professor of Neurosurgery in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Johnson passed away on September 4, 2025, having only just turned 44. She was an internationally recognized neuroscientist, a beloved aunt, sister, daughter, friend and colleague, a Scotswoman and a Philadelphian.

Born and raised in Scotland, Dr. Johnson, whom we all knew as Vicky (never one to tout her many titles or accomplishments), earned both her medical degree and PhD from the University of Glasgow, fostering the partnership between her two home institutions of Glasgow and Penn and her two true homes of Scotland and Philadelphia.

Vicky joined Penn following medical school, moving to Philadelphia in 2005 where she has lived and worked ever since. She pursued postdoctoral studies in the Penn Department of Neurosurgery and the Center for Brain Injury and Repair and was a two-time winner of the Murray Goldstein Award for Excellence in Neurotrauma Research. She joined the Penn faculty in 2016 as an Assistant Professor, quickly establishing herself as a leader in the field, securing continuous funding from the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health. Her pioneering research significantly advanced understanding of the mechanisms by which acute brain trauma leads to long-

term neurological decline.

While Vicky traveled the world extensively, she loved Philadelphia and made it her equal, not second, home to her native Kilsyth, Scotland. She was proud to have become a citizen of the US in 2022 and displayed her “I Voted” stickers from each election thereafter on the wall in her office, while her diplomas and accolades sat framed and stacked, unhung on the floor.

Unknown to many, Vicky movingly overcame breast cancer at age 40 and had no evidence of disease when less than four years later she received the devastating diagnoses of metastatic colon cancer that would take her life.

In her too short time and despite the challenges of her breast cancer in 2021 and her later colon cancer, Vicky remained remarkably productive. In 2024, she published a landmark paper in *Brain* on TBI in contact sports and was awarded a major new NIH grant. In 2025, she achieved tenure and was promoted to Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania Department of Neurosurgery, which in the prior year, ranked 3rd in the nation in NIH funding research among departments of neurosurgery, thanks in part to grants awarded to Vicky who was a top-funded neurosurgery researcher.

Dr. Daniel Yoshor, Chair of Neurosurgery, and Dr. Douglas Smith, Director of the Center for Brain Injury and Repair and her long-time mentor, PI and collaborator, described her as a

cherished member of the Penn research community whose legacy will live on through the colleagues and trainees she inspired and the transformative research she led.

Vicky succumbed to colon cancer much quicker than we had all hoped and predicted despite the excellent efforts of her care team, to whom she was

deeply grateful, and her own valiant, steadfast struggle for more time. She faced the disease head on and managed her care with laser focus on ensuring she left no one with the burden of her absence, that she did everything she could, for everyone else and for science, right to the end.

She had wanted to celebrate her tenure at a villa in Europe with an open house invitation. She talked about a dinner table filled with family, friends and the unparalleled meals she was known for procuring, whether through reservations at the best places in the world or her own outstanding cooking. We picture her there, inviting us in, sharing a glass of wine, becoming just shy of uncomfortably full as we soak up every flavor and the warmth of her company. We will miss her so very much.

She is survived by the three children she loved most, nephew and niece Patrick and Charlotte Johnson in Scotland and dear friend Orli Smith in Philadelphia, brother Scott Johnson and sister-in-law Victoria Carson, parents Frederick and Eleanor Johnson, her cherished friends and colleagues, and her loyal canine companion, Count, who laid at her feet to the end. Memorial services are currently being planned, and details will be shared with family and friends.

In lieu of flowers, the family welcomes donations to the KeystoneCare's Keystone House in Wyndmoor that provided excellent, affirming end of life care.

Tribute Wall

MF

“ I'm so sorry to hear of the passing of Dr. Johnson. She was wonderful to work with and very focused on safety in her lab. She and her discoveries in science will be greatly missed. My condolences to her family.

Marie-Luise Faber - October 21, 2025 at 01:00 PM

RA

“ It was an honor to work with Vicky over the last 20 years and I will miss her dearly as a friend and valued member of my work "family". I so appreciated her support and had much admiration for her work ethic as her career rose at Penn. She was a true and dedicated scientist, and great to work with. Never one to bask in deserved accolades and avoiding all cameras, she didn't hesitate to push up her sleeves, throw on a lab coat, and try to solve a question at the lab bench or organize a lab freezer. Vicky strived to meet all obligations, surpassing expectations, even through the tough times. She will be fondly remembered for her professionalism, her dedication and her scientific contribution to the field of neuroscience.

Robin Armstrong - September 16, 2025 at 11:35 AM

JG

“ Deepest sympathies to Vicky's family and friends. Vicky was a great scientist and colleague. She will be missed by all of us in the neurotrauma research community.

Jonathan Godbout - September 11, 2025 at 03:57 PM

DY

“ *I was privileged to work with Vicky at Penn for 5 years. She was a wonderful colleague and person and her passing is a great loss.* ”

Daniel Yoshor - September 10, 2025 at 03:27 PM