



FRANCES AMES - HUMAN RIGHTS CHAMPION

One of South Africa's most respected doctors and human rights activists, Frances Ames, died of leukaemia on 11 November.

In June 1999, Nelson Mandela awarded Ames with the 'Star of Africa', the highest civilian award in the country.

The University of Cape Town conferred the degree of MD *Honoris Causa* on her in 2001 'on the grounds of her excellence as an inspiring clinician, teacher, moral exemplar and citizen of distinction'.

Ames won international renown in the 1980s for her sustained fight to expose the conduct of the doctors involved in the neglect of Steve Biko, who died in detention in 1977 after torture by security police.

The SA Medical and Dental Council (SAMDC) initially exonerated Dr Benjamin Tucker, chief district surgeon of Port Elizabeth, and Dr Ivor Lang, his district surgeon assistant, of disgraceful conduct after they declared the tortured Biko fit to travel from Port Elizabeth to a Pretoria prison hospital. After being transported naked and manacled in the back of a police van, he was found dead the following day.

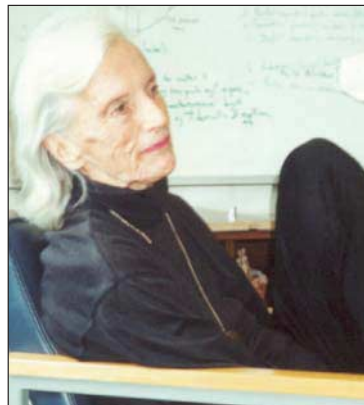
Professor Ames and four colleagues raised money to apply for a Supreme Court injunction to force the SAMDC to arraign the two doctors. They demanded a full and open inquiry and protested that the top medicine ethics institution should make an unequivocal statement about the duties of doctors to patients under all circumstances.

So began an eight-year battle to establish the truth. It was a long struggle in which Ames put her career on the line. As the sole breadwinner for four sons, she was even prepared to mortgage her house to pay the costs.

After protracted proceedings, she was eventually granted the order with costs. It was not until 1985 that Tucker was

struck off the roll and Lang was reprimanded and cautioned, ending a shameful period for the profession.

During this time the SAMDC came under intense international pressure - the British Medical Association even suggested that South African medical qualifications not be recognised until the matter was satisfactorily resolved.



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With the money that had been donated by those sympathetic to her cause, Ames and Professor Peter Folb initiated Medical Faculty Ethics Committees at UCT and Wits in the mid-1980s.

The issues that Ames raised, such as dual loyalties, continue to occupy center stage in South African practice, especially in the context of the government's response to HIV/AIDS.

Frances Rix Ames was born in Pretoria on 20 April 1920, the daughter of Frank and Georgina Ames. She spent part of her childhood in an orphanage after her mother, a nursing sister, was deserted by her husband and left

destitute with three daughters. The family moved to Cape Town and the daughters, of whom Frances was the second, were educated at Rustenburg school.

In 1942 Ames qualified with her MB ChB, the first of four medical degrees from UCT, and then worked as an intern at Grootte Schuur and a medical officer at Brooklyn Chest Hospital. In the 1950s she did her neurology training and started a family. By 1961, she was a full-time consultant in neurology, and she was the first woman to receive an MD degree from UCT in 1964. By 1967, she was one of a handful of South Africans qualified as both a psychiatrist and neurologist. In 1976 she became head of the neurology department at Grootte Schuur.

She married David Castle, a leader writer on the *Cape Times* who helped give the newspaper a strong liberal voice during the early years of apartheid. He died suddenly in 1967 and Ames, then aged 47, faced raising four young sons alone while working in a male-dominated medical profession.

The family's domestic worker Nomdlodla Rosalina, took over much of the mothering and housekeeping role for over 30 years. The two women became friends and after Rosalina's death, Ames recorded the story of their relationship in her book published last year entitled *Mothering in an Apartheid Society*.

Looking back on her career recently, Ames said she regretted having kow-towed to her male colleagues. 'I never thought to question anything,' she said, which put pressure on her dual role as mother and doctor. Yet it was Ames who led a group of male doctors to challenge the South African medical establishment and the security police in the Biko case.

Her concern for human rights marked her entire career. In the 1980s she



Ames' ashes were scattered on the grounds of Valkenberg mixed with hemp seed on her request.

counselled many political detainees. When one prisoner, Simpiwe Mtimkulu, died shortly after his release from prison, she demonstrated that he had been poisoned with thallium.

In 1997 she gave evidence at the medical hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, pointing out that Steve Biko was not the first but the 46th detainee to die in custody. She was praised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as one of only a handful of doctors who stood up to the regime.

She was also outspokenly critical of the 'war on drugs' and argued that dagga had been proved effective in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, and should thus be legally prescribable. Her viewpoint seems to at last be vindicated with the decriminalisation of dagga possession for medicinal use in Europe, Australia, Canada and some states in the USA.

Her 1958 article entitled 'A clinical and metabolic study of acute intoxication with cannabis sativa and its role in the model psychoses', is still quoted in today's journals. Ames and

her Melbourne psychology professor son, David Castle, published two articles together in 1998.

In fact, on her request, her ashes were scattered on the grounds of Valkenberg mixed with hemp seed.

In 1997 UCT made her an emeritus associate professor and she was awarded with an MD *Honoris Causa* in 2001.

Her legacy is the principle that it's the responsibility of every practitioner to uphold these ethical and moral issues — we cannot delegate that to another person or body.

Ames was also a great campaigner for pre-school education and improved pay and working conditions for domestic workers. She typically donated the proceeds of her book to the Quaker Service for pre-school education – her 'personal acknowledgement of past privilege'.

In retirement, Ames continued to teach neurology at the bedside to psychiatric registrars and to run the EEG department at Valkenberg Hospital, as well as practise clinical medicine at Valkenberg and Alexandra Hospitals. She worked until six weeks

before her death.

She is survived by her sons (two of whom are doctors), Adrian, Jeremy, Ben and David, and three grandchildren.

In a tribute to Ames, a colleague, Professor Trevor Jenkins, said she had initiated most of the action to conclude the Biko case. 'When it appeared to be a lost cause, it was her determination that was the decisive factor in convincing colleagues to persevere'.

MDPB's Len Becker: 'She will remain an example to us all'

Chairperson of the Medical and Dental Professions Board, Professor Len Becker, added that 'her legacy is the principle that it's the responsibility of every practitioner to uphold these ethical and moral issues – we cannot delegate that to another person or body. She will remain an example to us all'.

Professor Brian Robertson, head of psychiatry at UCT, said that her leadership in the human rights arena had been 'a beacon to everyone.'

In a eulogy at her funeral on behalf of UCT's Psychiatry Department, Dr Greg McCarthy humbly thanked Ames for her contribution to medicine. [Significant extracts of this speech are reproduced in the Forum obituaries section in this journal.]

'Thank you for the example you have set. Thank you for your dedication to teaching. Thank you for your perseverance, your honesty and, above all, your integrity and courage.

Thank you for all you have done for medicine, for professional ethics and for setting the standard of humaneness and humanity in this country.

Hamba kahle Mfundisi wethu, lala kakuhle ngoxolo - Go well, teacher, rest in peace.'

SAMJ Newsteam

