



Professor H J Koornhof – a tribute and an appreciation

Rare indeed are those individuals who combine the qualities of intellectual brilliance with a deep, abiding humanity and a sincere humility. It was John Ruskin who said 'I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility'. Embodying all these virtues is Professor Hendrik Johannes Koornhof, Emeritus Professor of Microbiology, University of the Witwatersrand.

Hendrik Koornhof was born on 18 May 1927 in Leeudoringstad in the then Western Transvaal and educated in the Free State. He obtained his MB BCH at the University of Cape Town in 1951 and the Diploma in Clinical Pathology and Diploma in Bacteriology in London in 1960 and 1966 respectively, became Fellow of the Royal College of Pathology in 1973 and Fellow of the College of Pathologists (SA) in 1992, and was awarded a DSc by the University of the Witwatersrand in 1997. He was appointed Head of the Department of Medical Microbiology of the South African Institute for Medical Research in 1960 and in 1971 became Professor and Head of the Department of Microbiology, School of Pathology, University of the Witwatersrand. He retired in 1992 as an Emeritus Professor and Honorary Professorial Research Fellow of Wits University. In 1995 he was recalled to full-time service as Acting Head of the Department of Clinical Microbiology. He remained in this post until 1998, and from 2002 to the end of 2004 served as Acting Head of the Sexually Transmitted Infections Reference Centre (STIRC). Currently Professor Koornhof is Senior Consultant Microbiologist in the Epidemiology Division of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and Advisor to the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) on infectious diseases.

Professor Koornhof has to his credit over 220 publications, the majority in international journals. His prodigious research output has embraced a wide variety of fields and reflects the breadth of his knowledge and interests. Much of this research was carried out when he was Director of the Medical Research Council Emergent Pathogens Unit. Among the foremost contributions he has made to medical science are studies of Vi polysaccharide vaccines for the prevention of typhoid fever, and determination of the prevalence of pneumococcal serotypes causing invasive diseases in South Africa in children and miners. He participated, together with the late Robert Austrian, in major evaluation studies of polyvalent pneumococcal vaccine in miners in South Africa in the 1970s. He also served as a member of the International Advisory Board of the Vaccine Trialist Group for the 9-valent pneumococcal conjugate vaccine trials in children with and without HIV infection, 1998 - 2002. He has had an abiding interest in tuberculosis and served as an advisor to the Medical Research Council TB Research Programme from 1993 to 1995, and is currently an advisor to the National TB Reference Centre being established at the NICD.

His encyclopaedic knowledge and deep insights into infectious diseases are widely known and highly respected at ward rounds, meetings and clinical consultations. He continues

to give extremely freely and generously of his knowledge to all who consult him. During his long career, often very demanding of his time, he has always had an open-door policy to all who came to see him. He has expended enormous energy and dedication to his students, and as a mentor Professor Koornhof has no equal. Officially he has supervised 1 MD, 16 PhD, 26 MSc and 11 MMed students, but unofficially he has mentored many more. As an illustration of his humanity and dedication I recall his undertaking to complete and submit a PhD thesis to enable his student, the late Dr Neville Richardson, to be awarded a doctorate posthumously. Some 59 registrars have been trained by him, many of whom occupy senior positions in prestigious organisations throughout the world. His generosity knows no bounds; he would drop everything to assist one of the cleaning staff with a problem, or, on a personal note, shared his office with me when I arrived as a Junior Consultant at the SAIMR Microbiology Department in 1974.

In addition to his extraordinary generosity of spirit to all who come into contact with him, his deep love of humanity was also expressed in his human rights activism in the dark days of the apartheid era. He served as Vice-Chairman of the Dean's Anti-Apartheid Committee and as Chairman of the Steering Committee for the Transvaal Branch of the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA) – formed to protest the inactivity of the then Medical Association of South Africa to act against district surgeons who connived with the security police in the murder of Steve Biko in the mid-1970s. When his daughter was imprisoned by the security police, including a spell in solitary confinement, he became an active member of the Detainees Parents Support Committee and frequently visited detainees to bring them food and comfort. During this period he received warnings from the Minister of Justice that failed to deter him.

This Festschrift has been compiled by past students and colleagues who eagerly contributed to it, and it has been sponsored by the NHLS. It serves as a tribute to one of the great sons of South Africa – a remarkably knowledgeable biomedical scientist, an outstanding teacher and mentor, and one of the most generous and humble human beings it has been my privilege to meet and associate with. Perhaps the finest tribute that could be paid to Professor Koornhof is the legacy of so many distinguished careers, throughout the world, that he helped create.

'... the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation, as presents to the posterity of those who are yet unborn.'

Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* No. 66, 10 September 1711

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