



## A mid-apartheid biopsy

In celebration of its 30th birthday *Die Beeld* newspaper enquired what noteworthy medical events had occurred in 1974. Reviewing the 1974 SAMJs provided a biopsy of our history that also showed changes that would harm the health of the Medical Association and medicine in South Africa.

### Content

The world's first successful sextuplet birth was reported, and doctors were better prepared for the press sensationalism than they had been with Chris Barnard's heart transplant seven years earlier. An opinion paper urged that a chair of sports medicine was long overdue. Prophetically a learned letter was published about exercise for the middle-aged by a medical student, T D Noakes, who subsequently became the first professor in sport science in South Africa. Computed tomography scanning and ultrasound, though still primitive, would soon replace more invasive methods, such as scintigraphy and arteriography, reported in amoebic abscesses of the liver. The introduction of flexible fibre-optic endoscopes was also revolutionising gastro-enterology. Articles and letters reported dramatic reductions in trauma admissions to hospitals following the fuel crisis in late 1973 and the resulting reduction of the speed limit on our roads. Dry reports of speeches and minutes of meetings have given way to *the excellent investigative reporting that now enlivens the SAMJ*. While cigarette advertisements were no longer accepted, there were advertisements for medical officers for the asbestos mines.

Many more scientific articles appeared than at present, as the SAMJ appeared weekly and there were few competing journals. *However there is currently an alarming decline in published scientific output in South Africa, including submissions to the SAMJ. To remain competitive in the world we cannot afford further decline in our academic centres.*

### Politics

It would perhaps be surprising to some that there were many references to attempts by the Medical Association to have racially discriminatory employment and salary scales of doctors abolished. The Medical Association resolved that 'henceforth the *South African Medical Journal* must not accept advertisements for medical posts if such advertisements contain any terms discriminating between doctors on grounds of race or colour'. A paper on nutritional development by H W van der Merwe stated that 'malnutrition is a basic aspect of the problem of race relations in South Africa, i.e. a problem that stands squarely in South African politics'. He noted that 'Individuals such as doctors, health officials and social workers and organisations concerned with development and nutrition, are therefore involved in the basic political issues of the country' and that 'while they should avoid partisan, emotional involvement, they should not shy away from their democratic responsibility to express themselves on the basic political issues that affect development and nutrition'. He provided devastating statistics on skewed resource distribution, including that in education 'the State spends about fifteen

times as much on each White child as it does on each Black child'!

After the death in April 1974 of the respected Associate Secretary of the Medical Association, Dr P D Combrink, Dr C E M Viljoen emerged as its 'General Secretary'. His trademark stamp of stance and style is evident in a supplement to the SAMJ entitled 'The true facts about medicine in South Africa' and 'compiled and issued by the Medical Association of South Africa'. It provides a stridently partisan defence of medicine in South Africa to counter a pamphlet that had been circulated to other medical associations. Professor J N de Klerk, who was elected vice-chairman of the Association, took it upon himself in a letter in the SAMJ to admonish the editor, Dr P J Biljon, about unfair commentary in his editorials (remarkably benign!), especially concerning government departments. The editor is reminded that '*u aan die beheer van die Federale Raad onderhewig is*'. Professor H W Snyman became president of the SA Medical and Dental Council. In his published inaugural address he analyses the numbers of medical students and doctors but discusses the latter only in respect of the '*blanke groep*'. Such viewpoints strengthened opposition to criticism of government policies, and when Biko was killed in detention three years later, both the Association and the Council were found wanting. This resulted in an exodus of members from the Association, including some prominent names, and the establishment of an opposition professional body, the National Medical and Dental Association (illustrating confusion between the roles of Associations and Councils). *As a result of our new democracy it has been possible to achieve a truly reunited professional Association.*

### Language

Editorials were in Afrikaans and English, speeches were often bilingual, but scientific articles in Afrikaans were rare. When English was forced on others early in the previous century Afrikaans speakers had resented it, and when Afrikaans later did the same it culminated in the 1976 Soweto student uprising. Ton Vosloo, chairman of Naspers, the owners of *Die Beeld*, recently said that he could not bat for Afrikaans alone but had to support all minor languages. *Views about the importance of language will be coloured by whether the main objective is the promotion of the language or communicating with the widest possible audience. Which begs the question — should the SAMJ have a formal language policy?*



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