OBITUARY: PROFESSOR DAVID BLUMSOHN

Emeritus Professor Ken Huddle

Professor David Blumsohn passed away on Friday, 15th October 2021, after battling a series of illnesses. Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic also impacted him in that he was, to a large extent, isolated from friends and family for long periods.

Professor David Blumsohn devoted more than 50 years of his life to the practice of medicine in South Africa, almost exclusively in the public sector serving the desperately poor and sick patients from Soweto who pour through the doors of Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital. He gave unswerving and loyal service to the Department of Medicine at this hospital for more than four decades. Initially as Registrar, then as Physician, Senior Physician, Principal Physician and Head of one of the large medical units. After his retirement in 1997, he continued to work in the Department as Honorary Professor, sharing his extensive knowledge, experience and wisdom with students, doctors and patients.

David Blumsohn possessed all the qualities of a great physician. He had an outstanding intellect, an encyclopedic knowledge of medicine, and an ability to inspire students. But above all, he was a humanitarian, ever-sensitive to the predicament of the downtrodden. He practiced what he preached; he treated all his patients with dignity and respect and was always available to them. Often times there was a queue of outpatients at his office door in search of solace or taxi fare. He wrote a moving article for the medical students’ journal, The Leech, entitled “The Pathology of Poverty” which has had a major influence on the thinking of our students. He was at the forefront of a campaign at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in 1987 in which doctors from the Department of Medicine protested at the deplorable conditions our patients had to endure. This protest action embarrassed the apartheid government sufficiently to allow the private sector to intervene and build ward extensions to enable our patients to be appropriately accommodated.

David Blumsohn was a scholar of note. Not only had he published widely in the medical literature but he had also been invited to leading cardiological and other medical institutions in North and South America as visiting professor, researcher, or teacher. Students held him in the highest regard as teacher and mentor. He regularly received letters and gifts from the students expressing their gratitude for his teaching, philosophy, guidance and mentoring, and for showing them the importance of patient-centred medicine. He was the recipient of the PV Tobias and Convocation Award for distinguished teaching in the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences in 1996. He was definitely one of the students’ heroes which is borne out by the fact that he had been the guest speaker at the final year medical students’ ball for five consecutive years. At one of these functions he said the following: “Never be indifferent. Never despair, but if you do, work on in despair. You will learn a lot from your patients: about ubuntu (humanness/humanity), isibindi (courage), hlonipha (respect/dignity), simple decency and unconditional trust. Never let them down.” This epitomizes his humanitarian approach.

Professor Blumsohn also had scholarly interests outside of medicine. He held a doctorate in Semitic languages and was extremely widely read.

In recognition of the extraordinary contributions to the Faculty of Health Sciences and its students, and to the community of Soweto, he was awarded the Gold Medal of the University of the Witwatersrand in 2008.

On a personal note, it was a privilege to have David Blumsohn as my mentor, colleague, and friend. I will treasure the many stimulating and pleasurable interactions we had, stretching over more than four decades.