

Professor Mervyn Shear

24 November 1931 – 24 January 2017

I write this tribute to Professor Mervyn Shear with sincere gratitude; mourning the loss of a giant in the world of Oral Pathology. It is indeed sad news for every member of our specialty. His legacy however will remain forever.

Emeritus Professor Mervyn Shear (UWC [2007]; WITS [1992]), internationally renowned and a global household name in Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology and Surgery died in Simonstown on Tuesday, 24 January 2017. Professor Shear was born in Johannesburg and graduated with a BDS in 1954 from WITS and the Royal College of South Africa, with the MDS (Oral Pathology) in 1961 from WITS and FRC Path from the Royal College of Pathologists in 1965. He completed the most eminent degree at WITS, the DSc (Dentistry) in 1973.



Professor Mervyn Shear

As the pioneer of Oral Pathology both in South Africa and worldwide, Professor Shear received the esteemed recognition of Honorary Life Membership from the International Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologists (past president), the British Society of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologists, Scandinavian Society of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathologists and SADA.

Until about 1953, Oral Pathology as we know it today was not practised in South Africa. When Mervyn Shear was a final year dental student at Wits in 1954, the course was given by Professor Julius Staz. Professor Shear enjoyed the course thoroughly and regarded them as the best lectures he had at the dental school. Following a short stint at Eastman Dental Institute, Mervyn immediately set about organising a biopsy service and focusing on establishing the speciality of Oral Pathology. He was the first chair of the discipline in South Africa and contributed greatly, despite some resistance, to Oral Pathology being affiliated to Anatomical Pathology.

Mervyn's immense contribution to the field and beyond was recognised with the distinguished award of honorary degrees: Doctor of Laws, LL.D (WITS, 1992), DChD (UP, 1999), FCD (CMSA, 1999) and FCPATH (CMSA, 2004). He began lecturing at WITS in 1955 and was Head of Department from 1968 to 1986. He enjoyed being Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois, Royal Dental College, Copenhagen and the University of Adelaide. Before being appointed Extraordinary Professor at UWC in 1993, Professor Shear was the Deputy Vice Chancellor at WITS (1983 -1990), Chair of the Eastern Seaboard Association Tertiary Institutions, Kwazulu-Natal, and member of the Council of the Universities of Durban-Westville and Lesotho.

Mervyn was a great pathologist, educator, writer, colleague and friend to many. He was kind, always having students' interests at heart. He was fondly known as "the cyst man" and will always be remembered as the foremost authority on cysts of the oral region, via his pioneering, seminal and indispensable text "Cysts of the Oral and Maxillofacial Regions", the fourth edition of which was published in 2007. He also co-authored the first two WHO editions of "Histological Typing of Odontogenic Tumours", and had more than 115 scientific publications.

I first met Professor Shear in Cape Town in 1993, when he took me under his wing as a young dentist. We jointly presented a paper on "The histogenesis of the Complex Odontome" at the IADR. I had the privilege of getting to know him and to enjoy his exceptional knowledge, passion, unbounded enthusiasm, insight and support. He remained a great colleague, mentor and friend. It was Prof Shear who prompted the uprooting of my family to Johannesburg to enable my training as an Oral Pathologist with none other than Professor Mario Altini at WITS.

As many may know, Prof Shear and his late wife Dr Caryll Frances Posel were proud members of the ANC. He was a great liberal, a brave political activist and forward thinker, and is often remembered as being a little mischievous. There are many stories about his being a thorn in the side of the apartheid government. He would often gather his staff to protest on the WITS lawns during those turbulent anti-apartheid demonstrations, with much resistance from many. It has been said that during one period of unrest, whilst police helicopters were buzzing over the campus, Mervyn had the students place chairs on the lawn in an arrangement which from an aerial view formed the outline of a not-so-kosher profanity.

Mervyn enjoyed life as he did his profession, spending his days listening to classical music, reading, swimming and walking. He loved entertaining friends and colleagues, and even Nelson Mandela at his home in Simonstown, impressing his guests with exquisite cuisine and a phenomenal collection of African and International art and art history.

One surely cannot be an oral pathologist without knowing Mervyn Shear, a remarkable oral pathologist and man. Professor Shear you will be dearly missed. I am sure that many of you will join me in bidding a fond farewell to such a great colleague. His essence will surely live on through his great contribution to Oral Pathology, in particular, and the kind and thoughtful person that he was.

Our condolences go to his son, Dr Keith Shear in Birmingham.

Thank you, Professor Shear. Hamba Kahle.

Shabnum Meer (Oral Pathology, WITS)