



Dr Ivan Toms – a true hero

To the Editor: I was shocked to read in the *SAMJ* of the unexpected death of Dr Ivan Toms,^{1,2} who served as a doctor in 3 Medical Battalion Group (3 Med Bn Gp), a citizen force unit, during the time that I was the officer commanding (OC).

I made an appointment to see him, since I was aware of rumours originating from the state security hierarchy that he was to be made an example of because of his well-known stance against any form of military duty. I was also aware of his sterling work at the SA Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA) clinic in Crossroads – he was at that time the only doctor taking responsibility for the health of more than 40 000 people.

I was immediately struck by his ready smile and friendliness. We had a long discussion, during which he informed me that he was not willing to do any form of military duty, not even in a medical unit or in the unit for conscientious objectors (whose members did gardening work, without being required to wear a uniform). He was clearly committed to serving poor people. Although not a religious devotee, he was a true believer in the principles taught by Jesus Christ.

My response was that I truly believed that he would serve South Africa best by continuing with his work in Crossroads. However, the limits of my authority extended to preventing 3 Med Bn Gp from calling him up for camps or border duty.

We got away with this for three years, during which time I stayed in contact with him. In April 1987, I resigned as OC 3 Med Bn Gp. In July 1987, the state security hierarchy charged and tried Dr Toms under compulsory conscription legislation. At his trial, I testified that he was truly committed to his work in Crossroads and that I believed that he served South Africa best in that capacity. The judge expressed the same sentiments before sentencing him.

The appalling experiences which he suffered in prison would have broken a lesser man. His subsequent appointment as Cape Town's Health Director and receipt of the Presidential Award of the Order of the Baobab were well deserved. I salute one of the most courageous men that I have had the privilege of knowing.

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1. Van Niekerk JPdV. Ivan Toms: Political and gay activist (Editor's Choice). *S Afr Med J* 2008; 98: 329.
2. Bateman C. Ivan Toms – A selfless model of social conscience. *S Afr Med J* 2008; 98: 338-340.