

Tribute to Jenny Acutt

SASOM Project Coordinator retires after 14 years of dedicated service

JENNY ACUTT

BA Cur (UNISA), MSc Nursing (Wits), RGN, RM, CHN, N Ed, N Admin, OHN



Born Jenneke van Sullichem in Pretoria in 1939, Jenny graduated as a general nurse from the Andrew McCollm Hospital in Pretoria. She then worked at the Philadelphia Mission Hospital near Groblersdal in Mpumalanga until she turned 21 and was able to register with the South African Nursing Council (SANC).

In 1961, Jenny moved to England to train as a midwife, but the Royal College of Nurses refused to register her qualification as she lacked two months of male medical nursing experience in her general nursing course! She completed those two months at the Dudley Road Hospital in Birmingham where the patients, many of whom had called in at South African ports during World War II, affectionately called her 'Sarie Marais'.

On completion of her midwifery training, Jenny toured through Europe and worked in the Wilhelmina Gasthuis Hospital in Amsterdam, before the call of home became too strong. She returned to South Africa and, while working at the Mowbray Maternity Hospital in Cape Town, met her future husband, Robin. They settled in Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1965.

Her children, Jann and Robin Anthony, were born in 1967 and 1969, and she found it very satisfying to be a stay-at-home wife and mother. Notwithstanding, an official from an international food and cosmetics company approached her and convinced her to provide healthcare to his employees. She soon realised that some aspects of their work impacted on their health. Since this was before the days of the Internet, the only information that she could find on healthcare for workers was half a page on 'The Factory Nurse' in a Royal College of Nursing publication.

On returning to South Africa in 1978, she worked for an engineering company. There she met Dr Phil Piek who supported her quest for occupational health information and introduced her to AC (Stella) Coetzee and Yvonne Campbell, who provided valuable input towards her professional development. This led to her registering for a course in occupational health nursing, which entailed attending lectures on two afternoons a week in the boardroom of the South African Nursing Association in Pretoria. Lecturers included Prof. AM Coetzee (Head of the Department of Community Health, University of Pretoria), Dr Hardy de Beer (dermatologist), Dr H Konig (ophthalmologist), Dr Phil Piek (occupational medical practitioner), Bunny Mathysen from the National

Occupational Safety Association (NOSA), and Dr JR Johnston (occupational hygienist), among other experts. There were 12 students who worked in different industries in Pretoria in that first course for the certificate in Occupational Health Nursing.

The South African Society of Occupational Health Nursing Practitioners (SASOHN) was inaugurated in 1981, and Jenny received the membership number 0016.

She went on to study for a BA Cur at the University of South Africa (UNISA) with Community Health and Nursing Education as her major subjects. In 1983, together with Theo le Roux, she established the Pretoria School for Occupational Health under the auspices of the Northern Transvaal Association of Occupational Health Nurses, a branch of SASOHN. The course lectures were based on the books *Occupational Health Practice* (1973) by RSF Schilling, *Lecture Notes on Occupational Medicine* (1976) by HA Waldron, and later *An introduction to Occupational Health Nursing in South Africa* (1983), compiled and edited by Dr Mike Baker and AC (Stella) Coetzee; and the World Health Organization (WHO) publication *Early Detection of Occupational Diseases* (1986).

As interest in training as occupational health nursing practitioners grew throughout South Africa, the course was converted to a distance learning programme and was eventually handed over to Prof. Barbara Robertson, Head of the Department of Nursing Education at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1992.

In 1994, SASOHN honoured Jenny with an Honorary Life Membership for her efforts in, and valuable contributions to, the education of occupational health nursing practitioners in South Africa.

Jenny continued to lecture on the nursing aspects of occupational health, and set and marked assignments and examination papers in her spare time until 2008 (when an official course convenor was appointed at what was then known as the 'The Centre for Additional Nursing Studies' in the Wits Department of Nursing Education).

Dr Ansie J Kotze of the Nursing Department at UNISA invited Yvonne Campbell and Jenny to contribute a chapter on 'The nurse in the Occupational Health Service' to her book *Occupational Health for the Nurse and Other Health Workers* which was published in 1992, followed by a second edition in 1997 to which Jenny contributed a second chapter on 'Emergencies and Disaster Planning'.



When Dr Kotze retired, Jenny and Susan Hattingh revised the third edition, which was published as *Occupational Health – Management and Practice for Health Practitioners* in 2003. Subsequently, new information was incorporated into a second revision of the third edition in 2009. This was followed by the fourth edition in 2011 and the fifth edition in 2016. Jenny contributed various chapters to Juta's *Manual of Nursing – Health Care Priorities*, Volume 3, which was edited by Ann Young, in 2005, as well as to *Vlok's Community Health*, sixth edition, which was edited by Marina Clarke in 2014.

In 2004, Jenny was awarded her MSc degree with distinction from Wits for her dissertation titled 'Air flow limitation and the prevalence of chronic bronchitis amongst cement workers in South Africa.' Prof David Rees, from the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH) in Johannesburg and the Wits School of Public Health (SoPH), was one of her supervisors.

In the same year Jenny retired from active occupational health nursing and was appointed Project Coordinator for The South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM). She retired officially this year and the SASOM Chairman, Prof. Daan Kocks, has stated categorically and proudly that Jenny assisted greatly with the growth and success of SASOM in South Africa in the 14 years that she served as the SASOM Project Coordinator, based at SASOM's national office in Pretoria. Jenny was the oldest occupational health nursing practitioner actively working in the field at the time of her retirement.

Whilst Jenny deeply appreciates the love and support

she received, firstly from her parents and then from her own family – husband Robin, daughter Jann, son Robin Anthony, and their respective families – she sincerely thanks everyone who impacted so positively on her professional career of many years, and helped shape who she is today. Jenny acknowledges that occupational healthcare, in all its varied facets, is moving forward at a rapid pace, and she admires the dedication of all involved in this process that benefits the health and wellbeing of our workforces.

On behalf of the South African occupational health fraternity, SASOM wishes Jenny all of the best with her retirement.

SAVE THE DATE – SASOM ANNUAL CONGRESS 2018

This year's SASOM Annual Congress will take place on 22 and 23 June 2018, at the Protea Hotel by Marriott, OR Tambo International Airport, Kempton Park. The theme of the Congress is 'Occupational Health – Looking back to move forward: old lessons inform solutions for new issues'. Please access the SASOM website (www.sasom.org) for more information, and to download the draft programme and the registration form.

Report by:

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