



# John Carol Anthony (Tony) Davies:

28 August 1931–3 March 2024

*Professor Emeritus, School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand; past Director, National Centre for Occupational Health, Johannesburg, South Africa*

Compiled by **Gill Nelson**: Editor-in-Chief, *Occupational Health Southern Africa*

In the previous issue of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*, we announced the passing of Professor Emeritus Tony Davies after a short illness. Although Tony officially retired in 2015, he continued to be a protagonist of workers' health, and he and his wife, Deirdre, were instrumental in assisting many people to claim compensation for asbestos-related diseases. He spent the last years of his life in Kenton-on-Sea in the Eastern Cape province, working on a book about these and his other experiences as an occupational medicine doctor. Less than six weeks after Tony's passing, Deirdre also passed away – testament to their close bond that was undoubtedly strengthened during the time they spent together, helping those so much less fortunate than themselves.

I was privileged to be among the early group of doctors mentored by Tony at the National Centre for Occupational Health (NCOH) in the mid-1980s. Although I left the Centre in 1987, the lessons I learned and the colleagues and friends I made have lasted me my whole career. This experience was, in large part, due to the ethos created by Tony during a very troubled time in our country's history. He encouraged our endeavours, took pride in our achievements, and protected us from Pretoria.

In an unfashionable discipline, the commitment he showed to recompense and justice, for the miners who had given their health to dig the wealth of this country, embodied social medicine in a clear form. His manner was courteous but his impatience and anger for what passed as business as usual in government and industry were righteous. These characteristics, as much as the technical skills that were learned, were, for me, the markers of a fulfilled career and a contribution to society.

Those of us who stayed in the unfashionable discipline are Tony's professional offspring and are grateful for it. We honour his life and mourn his passing.

**Rodney Ehrlich**

*Professor Emeritus, University of Cape Town*

In 1991, Tony and Deirdre examined thousands of ex-asbestos miners – they stayed in simple quarters at two hospitals on numerous occasions for six years. It cumulated in a six-month sojourn at HC Boshoff Hospital in Maandag's Hoek in Limpopo province. Together, they published a paper about the 770 women they examined, who were eligible for compensation because of their work in asbestos mines. It is the first paper to be published about women cobblers. In addition to the women, they helped more than 2 000 ex-asbestos miners receive compensation. The two of them endured tough working conditions to leave a formidable legacy.

**Marianne Felix**

*CEO: Stretch Education SA*

It was with a heavy heart that the South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM) and its members offered deepest condolences to the family, friends, and colleagues of Professor Emeritus Tony Davies, a long-time friend of SASOM, promoter and ambassador of the occupational health and medicine disciplines in southern Africa, and a stalwart protector of workers. Ever the inspiration and a guiding light to generations of OSH professionals and occupational medical practitioners, Prof. Davies' legacy lives on. He will be sorely missed by all of us!

**Claudina Nogueira**

*University of Pretoria, on behalf of SASOM*



Adler Museum function, 2008. L-R: Rochelle Keene, Tony Davies, Sharon Fonn

*Photograph: Rochelle Keene*



**Tony and Deirdre Davies, 2015**

*Photograph: Gill Nelson*

I remember Tony as a regular attendee at the Wits School of Public Health (SPH) academic meetings every Friday, when these were still a vibrant part of the academic life of the School. Notwithstanding Tony's vast knowledge of public health, he always treated junior or emerging researchers as if they knew a whole lot more than him. He asked gentle questions and made insightful comments.

The Wits SPH has a strong focus on occupational health, given the long history of mining in South Africa. In 2011, Tony contributed to the Special Issue that celebrated the Centre for Health Policy with enthusiasm and excitement.<sup>1</sup> Together with Jill Murray and David Rees, Tony highlighted the disjuncture between progressive health policies and implementation. Despite extensive research on silicosis, tuberculosis, HIV and AIDS, and compensation for occupational disease, there has been limited policy implementation, reflected in high levels of occupational diseases.<sup>2</sup> I enjoyed Tony's support when I became Head of School in 2012, and our light banter about split infinitives (which both of us disliked). Above all, I remember Tony's dry sense of humour. Rest in peace Tony Davies.

**REFERENCES**

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2. Murray J, Davies T, Rees D. Occupational lung disease in the South African mining industry: research and policy implementation. *J Public Health Policy*. 2011; 32 Suppl 1:S65-79. doi: 10.1057/jphp.2011.25.

**Laetitia Rispel**

*SARChI Chair: Research on the Health Workforce for Equity and Quality  
University of the Witwatersrand*

Along with many others in public and occupational health, both practitioners and beneficiaries, I have a lot to thank Prof. Tony Davies for. Tony was a truly effective mentor – in some ways, before his time – because he supported the development of people, both professionally and personally. At Prof. Jill Murray's suggestion, I have written a short account about some of Tony's work on asbestos, because it tells us a lot about him professionally.

With Tony's guidance and support, Marianne Felix did her PhD in the Mafefe area in Limpopo province. Mafefe is home to numerous asbestos deposits and also Penge – then a big asbestos mine. Marianne's was the first South African community-based study of asbestos exposure and asbestos disease. She uncovered high rates of previously unreported disease in a rural community.

Evaluating patients and submitting claims for workers' compensation can be drudgery, but Tony did this for many months over several years with the strong support of his wife, Deirdre. They published a paper in the *South African Journal of Science* in 2001<sup>1</sup> in which they reported that 96% of the 770 women miners they examined had asbestos-related disease. Again, this was done in a vulnerable rural community. Their work was valuable, scientifically, but more importantly, Tony's and Deirdre's work resulted in a much-needed flow of money into this poor community.

We have two Trusts in South Africa that compensate people with asbestos diseases – the Asbestos Relief Trust and the Kgalagadi Relief Trust. Both have been very successful, and thousands of people have benefited. Tony was instrumental in the early days of these Trusts. Richard Meiring of Leigh Day, the lead lawyer in the matter for beneficiaries, had high praise for Tony.

Brian Gibson the 'issue manager' for Everite – the big asbestocement company – and Tony became friends, in part because of Brian's admiration for Tony. Brian told me that Tony had resolved several deadlocks in the negotiations around the setting up of medical evaluations of former Everite workers.

Tony was an activist, a philosopher in some respects, and an academic who stimulated and supported important research, often in marginalised communities, but also a pragmatist who was able to get things done.

**REFERENCE**

1. Davies JCA, Williams BG, Debeila MA, Davies DA. Asbestos-related lung disease among women in the Northern Province of South Africa. *S Afr J Sci* 2001; 97 March/April:87-92.

**David Rees**

*Professor Emeritus, University of the Witwatersrand  
Former Director, NIOH*

Tony Davies was a critical pillar in academic occupational health in South Africa, an architect who, along with other leaders, established the foundation of our discipline. Tony played a role in moving occupational health in KwaZulu-Natal, when he seconded a short-term post from the National Centre for Occupational Health to the (then) University of Natal around 1995. This was a critical resource in our early days in trying to establish academic occupational medicine/health in the province. Similarly, I have no doubt, Tony's quiet but purposeful manner extended occupational health to the far reaches of our country during his tenure at the NCOH/NIOH, Wits, and the Department of Health.

**Rajen Naidoo**

*University of KwaZulu-Natal*

*"From 2005 to 2014 Professor JCA (Tony) Davies became the co-editor [of the Adler Museum Bulletin]. The Curator of the Museum, Ms Rochelle Keene, served as co-editor of the Bulletin from 2004 to 2014. Professor Davies' first editorial in 2005 marked the 30-year anniversary of the Bulletin. From the time he became co-editor, until his retirement in February 2015, he wrote 18 editorials, 5 articles and 3 book reviews."* (Extract from the editorial of the June 2015 issue of the *Adler Museum Bulletin*, by Prof. Jim Phillips.)

Tony also made an invaluable contribution to the Museum's Board of Control on which he served from 2005 to 2014. He visited the Museum frequently, being invested in its progress. We talked endlessly about all sorts of subjects, including, occasionally, his choir practice the previous night. We shared many hours pouring over manuscripts and, if accepted, days and days of editing them and producing many volumes, which gave us great satisfaction. We agreed that the *Bulletin* did not get a wide enough recognition or distribution.

His 18 editorials were unusual, topical, sometimes historical, sometimes philosophical, but always extremely interesting. They were frequently about his primary interest: occupational health. He also did not shy away from criticising the failing public health system in this country in editorials, which included:

- 'A lifetime of service, looking critically at the role of mission hospitals in South Africa and asking, in the failing health system in this country, if they should not be brought back' (June 2008)
- 'South Africa's health service: time for a re-think?' in which he wrote, *"Apart from two disastrous epidemics of communicable disease [since 1994], we have watched the steady decline of the health service to the point at which much of it can justifiably be described as dysfunctional"* (December 2009)
- 'Jobs half done, or just begun', in which he stated, *"It is clear that the present development failure in this country includes at least three important health science related elements: the failure to control chronic communicable diseases; the mounting burden of non-communicable (lifestyle) conditions requiring continuing care; and the decline of the health system ..."* (December 2010)
- 'Wanted – a launch pad', where he criticised the proposal, in principle, to establish a National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) in South Africa, which had become *"trapped in uncertainty and discussions of complex issues of marginal significance"* (December 2014)

Several editorials delved deeply into the topics of the annual AJ Orenstein Memorial Lectures, giving readers additional insights. These included:

- 'What did Sydney Brenner say?' (June 2006), related to the lecture, 'Human biology: health and disease'
- 'Disease knows no boundaries – and will find the chinks in our armour' (December 2011), related to the 2011 lecture delivered by Prof. WD Francois Venter ('HIV transmission and sex in Africa: Why can't we get it right?'), in which he emphasised that occupational health services and public health services should be expert in recognising and ranking risks to health, prioritising them, and taking action to increase the size of the non-risk fraction of the workforce or the population in question
- 'Going backwards to make progress' (December 2012), related to the lecture delivered by Professor Karl von Holdt, 'Towards the clinician-led management team: a strategy for fixing hospitals?'
- 'A place in the sun?' (June 2013), related to the lecture delivered by Prof. Jock McCulloch titled, 'Dust, Disease and Politics on South Africa's Gold Mines'

His articles for the *Bulletin*, as one would expect, all related to occupational health, mines, and mining history. Given Tony's deep interest in occupational disease, it is no surprise that his first article

for the *Bulletin* related to an historical moment which he felt was important to record for posterity; about the first recipient of a Wits postgraduate degree titled, 'A set of firsts: a brief appreciation of Dr George Frederick Mills Slade (1898–1976)' (December 2005). Slade was a member of the first class to study medicine at Wits and became the first medical graduate to receive a doctorate. He was the first medical officer to be employed by a South African chrysotile mining company. His MD thesis describes the first systematic study of the health effects of chrysotile asbestos dust on exposed miners. Tony, interestingly, noted that only one bound copy of Slade's thesis, titled, 'The incidence of respiratory disability in workers employed in asbestos mining, with special reference to the type of disability caused by the inhalation of asbestos dust', is in the AJ Orenstein Library for Industrial Health at the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), donated by the late Prof. Ian Webster in 1981. Copies lodged with Wits and the documents relating to the examination of the thesis and the conferring of the degree are thought to have been destroyed in a fire.

Other articles that Tony wrote for the *Bulletin* were:

- 'Dust and fibre levels at Penge amosite mine 1970–1971', where he cited Roderick Edward George (REG) Rendall as his co-author (June 2007). Rendall was a mining engineer by training, who worked for the greater part of his life in the Occupational Hygiene Section of the National Centre for Occupational Health (NCOH). He was responsible for milling the standard preparations of asbestos used in research studies all over the world, and pioneered the methods of dust sampling and fibre counting in South Africa. The article written by Tony acknowledged one of his major unpublished pieces of work.
- 'Enquiries into health and safety in South African mines in the 20th century: what did they have to say about occupational lung disease?' (June 2010): he wrote that the future of the working man or woman was bleaker and more uncertain than ever. *"In the hands of the captains of industry, the rich and powerful, dust levels and the prevalence of work-related disease and injury do not decline without tough state intervention"*, he wrote in an introduction to the proposed amendments to the South African Mine Health and Safety Act.
- 'What was known about miners' phthisis in South African Gold mines by 1930?' (June 2014). He compiled the article from archival material at the NIOH.

Tony wrote reviews of several books: *Yes, Health Minister. 40 years Inside the NHS Working for Children* by Dr Sonya Leff (June 2007) (reviewed with Rochelle Keene); *Adventure of Life. Reminiscences of Pauline Podlashuk* (December 2010); *An Uneasy Story: The Nationalising of South African Mission Hospitals 1960–1976: A Personal Account* by Dr Ronald Ingle (June 2011); and *South Africa's Gold Mines and the Politics of Silicosis* by Professor Jock McCulloch (June 2013). He also paid tribute to Prof. PV Tobias in an editorial titled, 'A deliberate scholar' (June 2012).

I know that Tony was writing a book when he passed away. He wrote to me: *"I quote from Archie Cochrane and have called my book 'Another Man's Medicine'. It is about medical practice in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe and I am trying to keep me-me-me out of the book. I am collecting electronic copies of everything published with my name on it as an author or co-author. When collected, as in the case of editorials in the Adler Bulletin, [they are] surprisingly interesting and polished and ignored."*

It was so like Tony to be modest about his considerable contributions in so many ways.

**Rochelle Keene**

*Former Curator, Adler Museum of Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of the Witwatersrand*

I worked at the NCOH from 1983 to 1986 when Tony Davies, a senior ex-‘Rhodesian’ public health officer took up the directorship. This was not long after Zimbabwean independence and was the last decade of the increasingly brutal apartheid system, in the face of popular resistance.

Tony Davies went out of his way to support our cohort: progressive young doctors, health workers, and researchers with a public health vision and belief in equity and social justice. He aided us in upgrading the NCOH workers’ health clinic and promoted our engagement with workers facing health threats at work. He encouraged us to talk and take time to learn about and record working conditions, liaise with their trade union representatives and advocates, and act to secure better health and working conditions. He recognised the value of careful history-taking and precise documentation. He encouraged and facilitated follow-up visits to workplaces, measurement of toxins and particulates, and firm engagement with employers who sacrificed health for profit.

Tony Davies was especially concerned about workers who had spent their working lives in hazardous jobs being discarded to the ‘Bantustans’, where health, medical care, and compensation for work-related ill-health and injuries were rare. He sought to ensure that those exposed to asbestos in the community received justice.

He wanted occupational health and the associated ethical considerations to be mainstreamed for medical students, public health and general practitioners, and specialists.

Tony encouraged us to research and teach, to write and pursue our specific interests. He enabled our work with trade unions and progressive organisations – National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA), Health Information Centre (HIC), Technical Advisory Group (TAG), Critical Health, and others. He greatly respected the research and analyses of thoughtful colleagues in Cape Town and Natal, and facilitated our collaboration.

He was always energetic and would, at times, literally jump up with enthusiasm. Yet he took a long-term and considered view; I remember him saying, more than once, “*slowly slowly... catch the monkey...*”. Rushing into things was neither wise nor strategic.

Alongside other mentors and teachers, I owe him a debt of gratitude. He impressed upon me the importance of using my privileged education and professional opportunities to do something concrete, however small, to address the inadequacies, inequities, and injustices of health in South Africa.

I remember Tony Davies with fondness and appreciation.

**Anthony Zwi**

*UNSW Sydney, Australia*



L–R: Deirdre Davies, Jim Phillips, Laetitia Rispel, Tony Davies, Karl von Holdt, Joyce Mogale, Sophie Kisting, David Rees

*Photograph: Sophie Kisting*

I have fond memories of Tony making all the effort to accompany doctors of the Industrial Health Research Group on our occupational health audits of asbestos mines in Kuruman in the Northern Cape, as the mines closed down in the 1990s. There were many workers with mesothelioma in the little hospital and lots more with other asbestos-related diseases. Tony, with his white coat and stethoscope in hand, demonstrated the “*fine late inspiratory crepitations in the axillary area*”, which he emphasised was pathognomonic of clinical asbestosis. Our audits of many

asbestos mines highlighted the suboptimal medical surveillance and compensation of these miners. These audits formed the basis of our submission to the Leon Commission of Inquiry into Safety and Health in the Mining Industry in 1994, of which Tony was a panel member. The Inquiry was a key milestone for occupational health and safety in South Africa and formed the basis for the Mine Health and Safety Act promulgated in 1996.

**Mohamed Jeebhay**

*Head of Occupational Medicine, University of Cape Town*

Tony hired me in the National Centre for Occupational Health's epidemiology team in 1984 on account of reading a paper I wrote about the epidemiology of cholera, but with no formal training on the topic. Margo Becklake started the department while on sabbatical from Montreal and Anthony Zwi took over as head soon thereafter, and we just got on with our various projects. These included work on asbestos, silica dust, the poultry industry, chest radiographs of workers, occupational health services and the like. Others who joined around that time were Gill Nelson, Danuta Kielkowski, David Rees, Clifford Goldsmith, Eric Buch, Umesh Laloo, and Rodney Erlich, all of whom still have illustrious careers in South Africa and abroad. Tony protected us from a very stiff bureaucracy, managed by Pretoria. Being based in Johannesburg may have had certain benefits, being slightly out of arms' reach from the top bureaucrats in Pretoria. Being in the research side, I was labelled "amper 'n amptenaar" [almost an official] by one of the administrators, which probably reflected Pretoria's view of all of us.

**Freddy Sitas**  
UNSW Sydney, Australia

Tony had an enormous impact on occupational health and safety – nationally, regionally and internationally. Similarly, he quietly had a major impact on my own journey in occupational health and I wish to share some of that. I first met Tony while doing a Master's degree at Wits University in the early 1990s. He provided input on occupational health in classes in Soweto and introduced the postgraduate class of medical doctors to the importance of the regular use of the ILO International Classification of Radiographs of Pneumoconioses. This set of X-rays, subsequently obtained from the ILO, became a mainstay in my future occupational medicine work.

As the Executive Director of the NCOH, subsequently the NIOH, for more than a decade, he steered it into a well-known and trusted centre of excellence for occupational health and safety, for research and for service provision to workers sick with occupational diseases. He almost unconditionally supported efforts to improve occupational health. On many occasions Tony readily agreed to personally



**Wits Faculty of Health Sciences function, 2007. L-R: Alan Rothberg, Rochelle Keene, Tony Davies**

*Photograph: Rochelle Keene*



**Adler Museum Christmas lunch, 2012. Back, L-R: David Sekgwele, Gilbert Singo. Front, L-R: Tony Davies, Rochelle Keene, Cheryl-Anne Cromie**

*Photograph: Rochelle Keene*

join a group of us from the Industrial Health Research Group at UCT, at the request of the very active trade unions at the time, to visit various distant rural workplaces to audit medical surveillance programmes. In this context, we visited asbestos mines where we read the chest X-rays of workers, using the ILO international classification, even at night by the light of generators, to complete the work within a working week. Similarly, Tony joined us for the reading of chest X-rays of hundreds of asbestos cement workers, as per the ILO classification. He provided the full support of the NIOH to us to collaborate with a group of occupational hygienists from Sweden, who were running workshops for workers in southern Africa to explore international methods to protect workers from exposure to silica dust.

In his public health lectures, he emphasised the great importance of dedicated support for PATHAUT, the database established in 1973 at the NIOH, which contains details of autopsies of deceased mineworkers. The annual reports are available in the public domain. The database provides surveillance data as well as information for teaching, training, and research.

Through his engagement in the Leon Commission, he – perhaps unknowingly – inspired many colleagues in the occupational health and safety sphere to commit to the importance of contributing to a better occupational and legislative environment in mining.

When I became the Executive Director at the NIOH, he was a regular and trusted visitor, an inspirational mentor and a father-figure. Always ready with great advice, copies of the latest interesting occupational health and safety publications, which he marked-up for easy reference, and some snippet of news which invariably made one laugh.

We will fondly remember his inspirational spirit, his inclusive approach to occupational health and safety, his conviction that a better world of work is possible, and his beautiful collaboration with Deirdre amongst the men, women, and families in asbestos mining.

Hamba Kahle, Tony and Deirdre.

**Sophie Kisting**  
Former NIOH Executive Director

I first met Tony in 1994, when he was Director of the NIOH. I had been pointed in his direction by the National Union of Mineworkers to learn about the epidemic of asbestos-related disease in South Africa. The case against Cape plc lasted nine years and was fraught and unpleasant, with Tony also being subjected to unfair personal criticism by Cape's lawyers for his passionate commitment to the rights and health of workers. His expertise, encouragement, and unwavering support was crucial to the case and remained steadfast throughout.

His advice and efforts throughout the gold miners' silicosis litigation from 2004 to 2016 were equally invaluable. He was patient and generous, spending a huge amount of his time at the NIOH and through written notes, explaining medical and technical concepts to me and my colleagues, and drawing our attention to important historical evidence.

He was highly principled and fearless in standing up for justice and redress for workers, and for irresponsible companies to be held accountable. I witnessed first-hand his kindness in his treatment of workers – he and Deidre spending months of their own time, annually, in Limpopo, examining and helping sick miners secure desperately needed compensation. On one occasion when I stayed there with them in the early days, I had started tucking into supper and had to abruptly put down my fork when I noticed Tony saying grace. I realised from then that his commitment to people was motivated by his deep, discreetly held, faith, which I did not share but greatly respected. Tony was a dedicated doctor and friend – and a truly inspirational man.

**Richard Meeran**

*Partner, Joint Head of International & Group Litigation,  
Leigh Day*

I have a lot to thank Tony for. If it wasn't for him, I would not have been an occupational health epidemiologist. He hired me, fresh out of my Honours degree, to work with Margot Becklake in the Epidemiology Unit of the NCOH, together with several others in the mid-1980s. He called us "bright young things" and watched with pride as we flourished in our individual careers over the next decades. Many of those people are still my colleagues today and I know that they, too, remember the early NCOH days with some nostalgia. Tony

was kind, generous, supportive, and totally committed to improving workers' health, way beyond his retirement in 2015. I visited him and Deirdre in late 2023, just a few months before he passed away. His mind was still sharp, his laugh was still loud, and his interest in what was happening in my and others' lives was genuine. My last sight of him was walking down the long driveway towards his house – a proud and deeply good man.

**Gill Nelson**

*Wits School of Public Health* 



**Tony Davies retirement function, 2015. L–R: David Rees, Charles Feldman, Steve Tollman, Tony Davies, Gill Nelson, Haroon Saloojee**

*Photograph: Gill Nelson*