

OBITUARIES

Obituaries should be submitted by email to Ruth Doherty at r.doherty@nature.com. All submitted obituaries should be 450 words maximum in length (apart from obituaries for past presidents of the BDA where the length should be 800 words). Content of the obituary is down to the individual author, and the approval of the family should be given for the obituary prior to submission to the *BDJ*.

AUBREY SHEIHAM

1936 – 2015



Inspirational, radical, passionate, benevolent and a pioneer ahead of his time are words commonly used in obituaries, but in the case of Professor Aubrey Sheiham, who died on 24

November 2015, these are an inadequate description of his truly outstanding professional and personal qualities.

Aubrey was born in 1936 in Graaff-Reinet in the Western Cape in South Africa, and after schooling in Cape Town he completed his BDS at the University of Witwatersrand in 1957. He immediately moved to London, initially working in general practice, and then as a senior house officer at the Eastman Dental Hospital. In 1961 he moved to The London Hospital Medical College where he held various clinical academic posts, including being appointed as a senior lecturer in periodontology on completion of his PhD in 1968. In the 1960s and 70s 'The London' was a creative academic environment where Geoffrey Slack, Brian Burt, Martin Hobdell, Aubrey and others developed community dental health as a core element of the dental curriculum. Aubrey's early interest in dental epidemiology and community dentistry steadily grew and became his main academic pursuit and lifelong passion. From 1975–1984 he was a lecturer, senior lecturer and, finally, reader in the Department of Community Dental Health at 'The London'. In 1984 he was then appointed as Professor and Honorary Consultant in Dental Public Health, and Head of the Joint Department of Dental Public Health at UCL and 'The London'. Offi-

cially 'retiring' in 2001, Aubrey tirelessly continued his academic activities at UCL in his role as Emeritus Professor in Dental Public Health.

In an illustrious academic career spanning over 50 years, Aubrey made an enormous contribution to dentistry, oral health policy and public health, both in the UK and globally. He published more than 480 papers and books on a wide and diverse range of clinical and dental public health topics. He had great academic integrity and a courageous willingness to challenge professional orthodoxy and powerful vested interests. He was one of the pioneers of evidence-based medicine. In his 1977 *Lancet* paper he challenged the then orthodoxy of the recommended routine six monthly dental recall as lacking any scientific basis and risking over-treatment. Despite very hostile and vitriolic personal attacks from elements of the dental profession, his critique eventually became mainstream policy in 2004 with the publication of NICE guidelines on dental recalls.

For many years he was at the forefront of public health research on the harmful effects of sugars consumption on both oral and general health. His research has greatly influenced recent national and WHO recommendations on sugars reduction, as an important public health priority. Aubrey also led research on oral health inequalities, both within and between countries, that has been highly influential in determining global research and policy agendas. As a fitting tribute, one of his final papers published in the Christmas issue of the *BMJ* challenged the received wisdom that Americans have better oral health than the English and showed far worse oral health inequalities in the US.

In addition to his prolific research outputs, Aubrey was an inspirational teacher, supervisor and mentor. As Course Director of the MSc in Dental Public

Health, initially at 'The London' and then at UCL, he inspired and enthused cohorts of students from all over the world. He also supervised 52 PhD students from 20 different countries, many of whom are now leading senior academics and policy makers. Linked to his personal and political commitment to social justice he was a leading public health advocate, heavily involved in campaigning with groups such as The London Food Commission, Action and Information on Sugar, The Caroline Walker Trust and more recently Action on Sugar.

Internationally, his contribution was recognised with various awards and prizes including honorary doctorates from the University of Athens and University of the Western Cape. The International Association of Dental Research twice awarded him Distinguished Scientists Awards in Behavioural Sciences and Health Services Research, and in 2014 he was the first recipient of the Distinguished Scientist Global Oral Health Research Award.

For those of us lucky enough to have known Aubrey as a mentor, colleague and dear friend it is almost impossible to capture the essence of this unique character. He was an immensely generous and kind man who shared his ideas, enthusiasm and passion for public health. Always challenging and thought provoking, for some he was a daunting character. However, he was a gentle, open-minded and warm person who transformed the lives of so many people through his intellectual rigor, enthusiasm and ultimate optimism.

Following his death, obituaries in the *Guardian*, *BMJ* and *Lancet* reflect his profound impact and scientific standing. His academic legacy will flourish through those of us fortunate enough to have been inspired by him. His wife for 49 years, Dr Helena Cronin, a Darwinian philosopher, survives him.

Richard G. Watt