

# OBITUARY

## Denise Anne Campbell White



News of the death of Denise White on 9 March in London, in the care of her beloved daughters, will have hit her colleagues extremely hard.

Denise graduated from the University of Cape Town. Addressing her fellow retirees in 2009, she recalled that when she had been a student in the 1960s there were no black Africans in her class, and coloured and Indian colleagues were not allowed to go near white patients at Groote Schuur Hospital. She observed that she and her fellow medical retirees had been privileged to have been part of a momentous passage from apartheid to democracy, and had seen the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT becoming fully integrated. As was typical, she challenged fellow retirees 'not to go home and feel sorry for yourself', but to continue making contributions, as the need for their services was so great.

The immensity of *her* contributions to the South African medical scene, chiefly through her work in the South African Medical Association and the Health Professions Council of South Africa, has been well documented.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2009, Denise was appointed to the Medical and Dental Professions Board of the HPCSA. There she served two 5-year terms, retiring only in 2016, and was appointed to several subcommittees dealing with matters of professional conduct as well as serving on

the Health Committee (assessing and ruling on 'impaired' practitioners). A life member of SAMA, she chaired the Academic Doctors Association and later the Public Sector Doctors Committee and for many years led the staff association of Groote Schuur Hospital, being succeeded by Prof. Mark Sonderup.

Denise was an effective communicator and natural leader, and often found herself leading in turbulent times. Her view was that there was no point in being 'timid or naive – you have to don an asbestos shield to deflect the heat of a crisis and remain cool'.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the era of AIDS denialism, as vice-chairperson of SAMA in 2005, Denise engaged in a campaign against natural health approaches, in particular as they related to AIDS, and issued a statement on behalf of SAMA directly attacking micronutrients in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. And, soon after her assumption of the chairmanship of the Association in 2009 in the hard days of the junior doctors' strike (the first in the country), she found herself in the roiled waters of medical politics ... in her own words, 'SAMA's titanic struggle' aimed at achieving the Occupation-Specific Dispensation for public sector doctors.<sup>[2]</sup>

As testament to her extraordinary commitment and her philosophy as expressed in 'if you have the ability to serve, you should', and despite diagnosis of the disease that was to cause her death, and the grievous sudden loss of her husband in 2015, Denise agreed to serve as president of SAMA for the 2015/2016 term. She devoted her term as president to raising awareness of mental health, which, as she expressed it, 'is unfortunately the Cinderella of the healthcare professions – always the Oliver Twist'. She would have been appalled to learn of the recent Esidimeni crisis. Her advice regarding implementation of effective mental healthcare in this country, involving multiprofessional teams and task shifting to mental health workers in community clinics,<sup>[1]</sup> would be well taken.

Denise was a superb clinical psychiatrist. She was chief clinician in the Emergency

Psychiatric Unit at GSH until her promotion to professor and head of psychiatry at Lentegeur Hospital. Legions of psychiatrists trained under her. Following her retirement, and having set up her own private practice, she continued to offer mentorship and advice by persuading these young colleagues, typically in solo private practice, to meet weekly in her rooms to participate in a journal club.

In the course of our responsibilities for convening undergraduate and postgraduate training in our respective departments, my counterparts and I frequently called upon Denise to come to the aid of junior, and indeed some senior, colleagues who were dealing with depression and distress of one kind or another. A phone call was all it took to enlist instant assistance.

As an academic and researcher, Denise was a highly sought-after speaker at international psychiatric conferences, having gained a national and international reputation for her early research focusing on the cause and management of the neuroleptic malignant syndrome. She (and colleague Dr Ashley Robbins) identified the link between administration of neuroleptic drugs to patients with a catatonic illness and evolution of the syndrome. Her later work concerned the links between HIV and psychiatric illness, half of all patients living with HIV/AIDS suffering some form of mental illness. She was also frequently called upon to address issues of women's health. Fittingly, in 2016 she received the Distinguished Service Award from the South African Society of Psychiatrists.

Denise White was a very precious friend and colleague to many, and will be sorely missed.

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1. Bateman C. SAMA president, medicopolitical veteran, psychiatrist and treatment pioneer. *S Afr Med J* 2015;105(12):1003-1004. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2015.v105i12.10301>
2. White D. The South African Medical Association (SAMA) – poised on the perimeter of change. *S Afr Med J* 2010;100(1):20-21.