

Professor Johannes Frederick van Reenen ...a doyen of the profession (20/04/1926 to 8/9/2007)



Johannes Frederick ("Frikkie") van Reenen (20/04/1926 to 8/9/2007)

Frikkie Van Reenen qualified BDS (Rand) in 1949, and then spent his first year as a dentist in London before returning to South Africa and opening a private practice in Pretoria. It was there that he began his foray into academia when he was appointed to a post as an honorary lecturer at the Faculty of Dentistry, University of Pretoria.

He remained in that position for some years, during which time he was amongst the first to recognise that combating dental disease requires a sound comprehension of the microbial organisms populating the mouth. Pursuing this passion, he returned to London in 1957 where he read microbiology at the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene.

He then returned to South Africa, and entered into full time academia, introducing the study of microbiology at Wits Dental Hospital and ascending in time to the post of Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry in 1975. As a full Professor he held that position and as Director of the Oral and Dental Hospital for 12 years up until 1987.

He was deeply committed to enhancing dental education and to the advancement of knowledge and acuity in the practice of Dentistry. To this end he served for twenty years as Scientific Editor of the South African Dental Journal. His time in this position was marked by his determination to ensure that the publication played a significant role in the profession. He selected the most contemporary articles that would have the greatest impact, and strived to present these in the most concise and lucid manner.

Frikkie also delved into research in prosthodontics, oral microbiology and anthropology. He contributed to an understanding of the culture of the San people and was noted for his empathy with these much smaller folk, towering over them from his well-over six foot height. Not only was he a great academic, but Professor van Reenen had many interests beyond dentistry including his love of music, in which he became well qualified, holding recognitions including the Licentiate of the Royal School of Music (LRSM), the Licentiate of Trinity College London (LTCL), and the University Teachers Licentiate in Music (UTLM). His appreciation of the aesthetics in life, for he deeply enjoyed art and received regular Monday evening tuition under renowned South African artist Lionel Abrams, gave Frikkie a special sense of how to

combine beauty, health and function into dentistry. That understanding ensured that countless students under his tutelage came to recognise those critical balances in their practice of Dentistry, and enhanced their empathy for their patients. His students recognised his dedication by creating the Professor Van Reenen Award, an accolade to teaching excellence.

In addition to all of these commitments, Professor van Reenen became involved in many of the wider aspects of Dentistry in South Africa. He was a long-time member of the Federal Council of the Association, and held office on the Health Professions Council and the South African Medical Research Council. As a founder member of the Prosthodontic Society of South Africa, Professor van Reenen also was an inspiration in the founding of the Academy of Prosthodontists of South Africa. Elected as a Fellow of the College of Medicine of South Africa, he contributed to the creation of the Faculty of Dentistry at the College.



Frikkie was a very private and reserved person, but at the same time was always open and approachable. A man of impeccable style, dress and demeanour, well into his 70s he was noted to have said that he "longed for the day that he would be old enough to walk with a cane, as he considered this to be very genteel". He never did need that cane, and was in any event already the epitome of a true gentleman.

Prof van Reenen was a steadfast man of unflinching integrity, who throughout his life held himself to the highest ethical principles and endeavoured to ensure that through his teaching, his beloved profession should be an example of ethical commitment and clinical excellence, a noble contribution indeed.

With acknowledgments to Professor Leanne Sykes and Dr Michael Hellig.