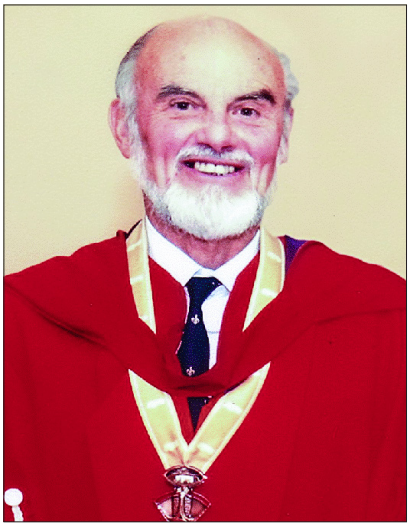
OBITUARY

Peter Herbert Beighton (1934 - 2023)



It is with great sadness that we pay tribute to the remarkable life of Emeritus Prof. Peter Beighton. As news of his passing reaches us, we, in the Division of Human Genetics, stand together in solemn reflection, honouring a remarkable leader and mentor who helped introduce and transform the field of Human Genetics in South Africa (SA).

Professor Beighton's academic journey began with his medical training at St Mary's Hospital/University of London followed by specialisation in internal medicine at St Thomas' Hospital in London, where he laid the foundation for his exceptional career. From there, he went on to the USA to work under the tutelage of the Godfather of Medical Genetics, Dr Victor McKusick, a legendary figure in his field (and of OMIM and other fame), at Johns Hopkins Hospital/University of Baltimore. This pivotal experience, and working with the leaders in the field of human and medical genetics, deepened his understanding of the field and ignited a passion within him that would shape the course of his life's work. Fuelled by an insatiable curiosity and keen observational eye, Prof. Beighton's thirst for knowledge led him to explore uncharted territories. He undertook ground-breaking research unravelling the mysteries of genetics in the most remote corners of the world including enigmatic geographical locales such as the Sahara Desert, Easter Island, Tristan da Cunha and St Helena, where he expanded the boundaries of his scientific endeavours. In 1970, Prof. Beighton's exploratory journey brought him to SA, when he joined the Division of Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of the Witwatersrand. The purpose was to conduct large-scale epidemiological studies of indigenous populations of SA, which resulted in a PhD and formed the basis for current clinical assessment of an individual's range of joint movements, which is now known as the 'Beighton Scale'. In 1972 he joined the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Groote Schuur Hospital as the first Professor of Human Genetics. Under the guidance of Prof. Stuart Saunders (head of the Department of Medicine at that time, and subsequently the vice-chancellor of UCT), he established the Department of Human Genetics within the Department of Medicine at UCT.

Throughout his illustrious career, Prof. Beighton's dedication and expertise led to an astonishing body of work. With over 430 peer-reviewed publications to his name, 34 chapters in books, and 20 monographs and editions, his research resonates across the scientific landscape, continuing to shape our understanding of inherited disorders of the skeleton and connective tissues. His contributions have become the cornerstone of our field, enlightening countless researchers and inspiring generations to come. Beyond his scientific achievements, Prof. Beighton was a compassionate and supportive mentor to all who had the privilege of working alongside him. His guidance, wisdom and belief in the potential of staff and students have empowered us to push the boundaries of our own capabilities. He nurtured an environment of collaboration and intellectual curiosity, fostering a community of scholars driven by a shared purpose to unlock the mysteries of the human genetic code.

Prof. Beighton's tireless efforts were acknowledged and celebrated throughout his remarkable journey. His accolades included the Gold Medal of the British Orthopaedic Association, the President's Medallion of the SA Orthopaedic Association, the Smith & Nephew literary award and the Silver Medal of the SA Medical Research Council. In 2002, he was the inaugural recipient of the esteemed Order of Mapungubwe – bronze, bestowed upon him by President Thabo Mbeki, in recognition of his lifetime achievements as a scientist and his unparalleled research into human genetics generically, and inherited disorders of the skeleton specifically. He was the subject of a Festschrift published as a supplement to the *South African Medical Journal* on 1 June 2016, which honoured his knowledge, leadership and mentorship in the field of medical genetics.

We not only mourn the loss of an extra-ordinary scientist and visionary leader, but we also celebrate a life well lived and the enduring legacy of Prof. Peter Beighton. Throughout his remarkable life, Peter and his wife Greta shared an interest in the history of Medical Genetics, and have published two unique volumes of biographies of people for whom genetic syndromes have been named. Peter and Greta participated in the sport of orienteering for many years, and they were SA champions in their respective age groups on several occasions. Greta died in Cape Town on 29 May 2017, and this took a toll on Prof. Beighton. Prof. Beighton is survived by his three remarkable children, Victoria, Robert and Charles, who have excelled in their lives, careers and growing their own families.

His impact reaches far beyond the confines of our institution, extending into the very fabric of scientific exploration and the hearts of all those who have been touched by his wisdom and guidance. May his indomitable spirit and insatiable thirst for knowledge continue to inspire us as we carry his legacy forward, advancing the frontiers of Human Genetics in his honour. May his soul rest in peace.

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