**CITATION: John Spencer Sutherland Gear**

Professor John Spencer Sutherland Gear, born 20July 1943, was the inaugural chair of the Department of Community Health at the University of the Witwatersrand, a position which he held from 1979 until 1990. He was also Academic Director of the Wits Rural Facility from 1989 to 1997. He is a ‘Witsie’ through and through, having obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in 1963, an MBBCh in 1967, a diploma in public health in 1972, and a diploma in tropical medicine and hygiene in 1979, all from the University of the Witwatersrand. He earned a DPhil from Oxford University in 1979.

He is the recipient of numerous awards, starting with the Gordon Grant Prize in Gynaecology, for the best final year student at Wits, and the Medical Students Council Prize. He won the Nuffield Dominion Trust Scholarship to Oxford University in 1974/5. Later in his career he was awarded a Kellogg Foundation International Leadership Fellowship for 1990-1994 and the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa’s Fellowship ad Eundem in 2005. His service to public health was recognised with the silver medal of the Community Health Association of South Africa in 1984, the Wits Faculty of Health Sciences Exceptional Service Medal in 2012 and the Public Health Innovation and Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013 from the Public Health Association of South Africa.

Professor Gear is a passionate and inspired leader in the field of public health, and played a major and influential role in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. His greatest contributions to public health and community development in South Africa are in the following areas: improving the health and well-being of poor South Africans, particularly in rural areas; scholarship and research; introducing revolutionary approaches to teaching and learning; and developing public health leaders for a democratic South Africa.

Professor Gear introduced the concept of primary health care at Wits University in 1979, following the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978. At that time, primary health care was a new approach around the world and South Africa was not part of the World Health Organization, because of apartheid. Largely through Professor Gear’s efforts, the concept of primary health care percolated throughout South Africa. It has remained a central tenet of reforms in South Africa, illustrated by the 2015 White Paper on National Health Insurance. In 1981, Professor Gear established the Health Systems Development Unit at Tintswalo Hospital, in what was then the “homeland” of Gazankulu, now Mpumalanga province. The unit carried out pioneering work which has since been taken further by the MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit at Agincourt.

Under Professor Gear’s leadership, the Centre for Health Policy was established in 1987 to support the development of post-apartheid health policy and a unified health system. The Centre continues to conduct excellent research which generates new knowledge on health policies and systems.

Professor Gear was and remains a champion of the needs of under-served and poor communities. His experience at the Health Systems Development Unit at Tintswalo Hospital highlighted rural neglect and the limitations of a singular approach. He envisaged a multidisciplinary rural facility which would provide more relevant education for Wits students and would benefit rural communities.

From 1986 he began conversations within the University community about this project. In 1989 the Wits Rural Facility was established with Professor Gear as its Academic Director, a post he held until 1998. He raised significant grant-funding for the Facility and worked tirelessly to secure the participation of the majority of faculties at Wits.

The mission of the Wits Rural Facility is that “the University should, through a permanent presence in a rural area, create a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary endeavour contributing to the development of such areas; informing society of rural needs; providing experiential community-based learning; alerting graduates to the challenges and rewards of working in rural areas; and benefiting both immediate communities and society as a whole…at all times informed by the principles of justice and equity.”

Under Professor Gear’s leadership, by 1993 the Wits Rural Facility boasted a range of outreach interdisciplinary programmes staffed by 23 fulltime donor-funded academics. The Facility’s enduring success is attributable in large part to Professor Gear’s strong visionary leadership, his work to secure commitment from stakeholders, and his resolute focus on local priorities, including deficient social services and poverty.

The Wits Rural Facility today continues to embody the concept of interdisciplinary rural research which informs health care.

Professor Gear is deeply committed to research excellence and the generation of evidence. He was the youngest full professor in the Faculty of Medicine (now the Faculty of Health Sciences) at Wits University when appointed as the Chair of Community Health in 1979. He has published more than 60 peer-reviewed journal articles on subjects that range from Marburg Fever through to primary health care, rural health and human resources for health. In 1987, when there were only a handful of AIDS cases in South Africa, he recognised the importance of this emerging HIV epidemic. He mentored a group of his registrars to write three seminal articles on AIDS in the *South African Medical Journal.*

During his tenure as Chair of Community Health, he established a vibrant postgraduate research culture, with nine PhDs successfully completed under his supervision. This was a significant achievement, given that doctoral degrees have become a major emphasis in South Africa’s universities in the past 10-15 years.

Professor Gear imbued those around him with the spirit and philosophy of primary health care, and the principles of social justice, equity and human rights. He played an important role in getting the then Medical and Dental Council to recognise medical specialist training in community health. He also lobbied for the inclusion of community-based experiential teaching in undergraduate medical training and introduced a compulsory rural rotation for public health medicine registrars.

Professor Gear is passionate about nurturing and mentoring the next generation of public health leaders. Many of the staff and students mentored by him went on to occupy leadership positions in government, universities and international organisations in South Africa and abroad and it is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg awards an honorary doctorate degree toJohn Spencer Sutherland Gear.