

## HONORARY DOCTOR OF MEDICINE: PROFESSOR YOSUF (JOE) VERIAVA

Yosuf "Joe" Veriava is perhaps best known within the academic community for the 'Steve Biko court case' which he led against the South African Medical and Dental Council in 1985. Joined by other renowned Wits academics, including Philip Tobias and Trefor Jenkins, the group succeeded in restoring some faith and confidence in the medical profession by having the errant 'Biko doctor' struck off the medical roll. The official case reference [Veriava and others v President, South African Medical and Dental Council, and others, November 1985] defines Professor Veriava as a person who lays the ethical and moral foundations on which others may build. He is a person who is able to stir the conscience and mobilise the support of giants like Tobias and Jenkins; someone who has the courage to challenge and rock the very foundations of his own profession. The Biko case, while worthy and triumphant in its own right, was but one of many moral and ethical victories in a campaign that started at least a decade earlier, with Veriava, a junior medical consultant at Coronation Hospital and a member of the Wits academic staff, regularly confronting the Director of the formidable, arbitrary and vindictive Transvaal Provincial Hospital Administration.

Himself a victim of differentiated salary and other conditions of service that were applied to 'non-whites', Joe established groupings such as the Doctors' Support Committee, but it was mostly in his personal capacity that he confronted the authorities, invariably risking his own position, and on several occasions compromising opportunities for promotion. Whether campaigning for equal conditions of service for equally-qualified professionals, equal opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate students, desegregated facilities for patients, or the right to publish revealing facts on disparate hospital conditions, he was always at the forefront. As such, he has served the Faculty, the University and the country in the pursuit of dignity and justice for more than 30 years, and there can be few people in our midst who have done as much to move this institution and its various medical campuses forward in the quest for equity and transformation.

Behind the academic scenes Joe was also politically active in positions such as Secretary for Health of the Azanian Peoples Organisation, and he played a vital role in providing health services to disadvantaged and disempowered local and remote communities, from Kliptown and Alexandra to Brandfort and Potgietersrust. These activities gained him recognition by the populist Sowetan newspaper and Drum magazine, while simultaneously putting the hospital administration on alert for any infringements that would give them cause for his dismissal. However, Joe always ensured that his patients had been treated, his students taught, his clinical duties fulfilled.

His profile as a highly-regarded clinician and an activist undaunted by apartheid officialdom and its menacing organs resulted in Joe being called on repeatedly by lawyers in the late seventies and early eighties to examine detainees and provide evidence of abuse and torture. This he did with unwavering honesty and objectivity, again ignoring the risk to his own freedom and professional career. His involvement with detainees led to the establishment of the Parents' Support Group and a medical panel that gave further voice and some opposition to the plight of detainees and the circumstances under which they were held. As a consequence of these and other activities that involved parents, notably the protection of children engaged in the schools boycott in 1980, Joe was detained for five months during which he was assaulted and subjected to prolonged solitary confinement, while also having to deal with the news of his father's unexpected death.

At Faculty level Professor Veriava has been a driving force behind the establishment of standing committees such as the Equal Opportunities, Racial and Sexual Harassment Advisory, and Professional and Ethical Standards committees. More important, however, were his roles in the

Faculty's submission to the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997, and the Faculty's subsequent Internal Reconciliation Commission. These initiatives speak to another aspect of Joe's make-up, his commitment not only to rights and justice, but also to peace and reconciliation. A consistent and renowned characteristic of this man of profound integrity remains to always engage and respect colleagues (even through times when they were undoubtedly less than worthy of that respect) and not to bear grudges or harbour resentment. In return he enjoys the respect of those who work with and for him, and it is clearly apparent that when he speaks out in an assembly such as the Senate on matters of principle, ethics and equity, colleagues listen and are usually persuaded by his rational and balanced arguments.

Joe's contributions to the rights of patients, doctors and students, and his victories over the injustices of academic and hospital apartheid, between 1970 through even into the nineties, are identified in Advocate Jules Browde's Report on the Faculty's Internal Reconciliation Commission. These include leading roles in:

- the development of an ethical policy for the management of hunger strikers (essentially preventing the police from removing striking prisoners from the hospital)
- the formal establishment of the Coronation and J G Strijdom hospitals as a multiracial hospital complex following the disastrous transfer of the latter hospital to the white 'Own Affairs' department in an attempt to exclude other races, and
- support for a group of Baragwanath doctors in their case against the Province after they had been denied jobs for refusing to apologise to the Director of Hospital Services for a critical letter published in the South African Medical Journal.

These and other achievements have won Joe an Indicator Human Rights Award, an award from the South African Medical and Dental Practitioners group, the Benjamin Pogrand Medal from Wits, the Alligarh Gold Medal, and importantly, in eventual recognition for his contributions to the Gauteng Province and its health system, he recently received the MEC's Award for Service Excellence. The University recognised his clinical abilities and superb leadership skills by appointing him as Academic Head of the internationally-renowned Department of Internal Medicine. However at this time we would be failing in our duty were we not to also recognise his unwavering commitment and dedication to the human, moral, ethical and transformational aspirations of Wits and the communities it serves. *Honoris causa* is translated as 'by reason of honour' – Joe Veriava has honoured Wits by his contributions over thirty years, it is appropriate for us to now honour him.