

## **CITATION: PROFESSOR EMERITUS ISIDOR SEGAL**

Emeritus Professor Isidor Segal – known to many as Issy - was born in Johannesburg on 7 July 1933. He was one of eight children.

After graduating from the University of the Witwatersrand with a MBBCh in 1962, he worked in Soweto as a GP, or general practitioner, for seven years. This was a time in South Africa when very few people from his background chose to work among the needy in Soweto. It was a decision which changed the direction of his life and his work, the lives of many black South Africans and ultimately, a particular discipline of medicine in Africa. While treating his patients, he noticed trends related to their digestive systems. This was both in terms of disorders they had and those they didn't. He decided to pursue this further by specialising as a gastroenterologist.

He went on to establish the first Gastroenterology Unit at what was then Baragwanath Hospital. This was in 1975, a time when specialised academic units of this type didn't exist, least of all in Africa. Dr Segal was director of the unit until 2002 during which he did extensive, ground breaking research that resulted in a proliferation of academic papers about gastrointestinal diseases in people living in Soweto. He led the research with a team that included international researcher Dr Alex Walker of the Wits School of Pathology. They looked at cancer of the oesophagus which had gone from a rare disease among black South African men to their commonest cancer. Published in 1984, the research focused on the sociological contributory risk factors in the urban black population of Soweto. It had previously been noted that smoking pipe tobacco was a risk factor. Their research reinforced this. It also showed that the consumption of traditional beer was a major risk factor.

Other research of Segal's in the 1980s revealed black South African men were diagnosed with oesophagol cancer a decade earlier than their White counterparts, who also lived twice as long after diagnosis. He also researched the connection between appendicitis and the level of dietary fibre intake; hepatocellular carcinoma, or cancer that starts in the liver, and how it relates to oral iron overload; as well as the low incidence of colonic polyps in the South African black population. Besides working with the likes of Walker, he also published his research in collaboration with British surgeon Denis Burkitt, a pioneer in showing how high fibre diets help protect against colon cancer.

Professor Segal's innovative research was not only to explore the differences between gastroenterological diseases in Black and White South Africans. It was also to ensure these conditions were appropriately and successfully managed in the underserved populations of Soweto and beyond.

Wits recognized his contributions to the field of gastroenterology by promoting him to associate professorship in 1981 and subsequently to full professorship in 1991. In 1992 Prof. Segal founded the African Institute of Digestive Diseases with training centres at two of Wits's teaching hospitals, Baragwanath and the then Johannesburg General. Its aim was to promote gastroenterological education, training and research in south, central and northern Africa. More importantly, however, was the Institute's aim to ameliorate gastrointestinal disease in Africa, improve standards of health care and education and to inspire confidence that Africa can contribute to finding solutions to the continent's health problems. This venture was conducted without government financial support.

Professor Segal said that the “the ideals and philosophy of the African Institute go far beyond the frontiers of gastroenterology and endoscopy”. It provided “an opportunity to break down artificial borders and cultural barriers and to pool the African continent’s rich resources of talented people to enhance the level of care given to our patients”. Through his work in Soweto and subsequently his African advocacy role, Issy Segal’s national and international profile resulted in many international invitations to share his knowledge and insights, with its particular focus on the African continent and other regions of the developing world.

He served on the World Gastroenterology Organisation’s Education and Training Committee for Africa and the Middle East. He was also on the Scientific Advisory Committee for the World Congress of Gastroenterology in 1998. His peers recognised his contribution and he was made president of the South African Gastroenterology Society, SAGES, from 1987 to 1988 and Honorary Life-President in 2001. The Faculty of Health Sciences presented him with an exceptional service medal in 1998. In 2009 he was named a Master of the World Gastroenterology Organisation. The highest honour the organisation can bestow on a member granted for outstanding dedication to the mission of the organisation and to those who have achieved distinction in areas as scholarly research, teaching, and service to the community at large. Recipients may use the title of “Master of the WGO”, or World Gastroenterology Organisation , and the letters “MWGO” in conjunction with their name.

Issy Segal has not let his octogenarian status affect his output. At 86 he is still a force to be reckoned with. The most recent of his three textbooks, *Digestive Diseases in Sub-Saharan Africa: Changes and Challenges*, was published in October last year. It provides evidence of the changes in digestive disease in Sub-Saharan Africa due to Westernisation and shows the influence of factors such as urbanisation, upward mobility and the availability of natural resources.

His extensive publications include a very personal one, a 132-page volume published in 2016, titled *Diary of a Slumboy: Selected Poems*. He referred to these as snapshots of Soweto and Baragwanath Hospital, which reinforce for him “the poverty, sadness and despair that is the lot of most of the inhabitants of Soweto”.

In light of all his extraordinary achievements it is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, bestow an honorary doctorate degree on Isidor Segal.