

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Fellowship *Ad Eundem* of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (2015)
- Member of the Executive Council's Annual Service Excellence Award – Special recognition for overall contribution to health care in the field of Paediatrics (2014)
- Durban South Doctors' Guild Lifetime Award – In recognition of dedication and contributions towards Paediatric Medicine and Child Health Care (2014)

## DEFINING MOMENT

As a trained neonatologist and paediatrician, she dealt with many sick newborns but one moment stood out for her: “One thing in neonatal care that broke my heart was when we diagnosed human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Tuberculosis (TB) in newborns in 1996. Those were the most difficult conditions to accept in the newborn.”

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

Although it was not expected of her, she took it upon herself to pass on to those around her any new skills she acquired – a practice she has followed in training nurses for 45 years.

## ADVERSITY INSPIRED CHANGE

“Even with the many traumas we experience in our country, I remain positive and I still believe that we can go forward. I don't think we see all the goodwill that is out there,” says Miriam Adhikari, who spent much of her life in neonatal wards, working with and leading the men and women who care for newborns. Her research has focused on gaining a better understanding of the clinical situations experienced in neonatal care, especially kidney disease in neonates and young children.

## ESTABLISHING NEW REGIMENS

Adhikari opened a neonatal intensive care unit at King Edward Hospital in 1979 after her training in the United Kingdom and she trained nurses to use the services. “The babies came to the unit in very poor clinical condition,

so I started training the nurses and this was something I continued for many years.” Some of the nurses she trained now work in national health – a source of pride for Adhikari and testimony to her dedication to her work.

She later set up a dialysis unit and helped to establish paediatric transplantation in the neonatal unit at King Edward. “It was the most amazing thing to see a child after transplantation get better and go home.” She recalls that at the time she was working with great teachers such as Professors YK Seedat and Hoosen Coovadia, and their supportive involvement helped her to make a success of the programmes she introduced.

Adhikari established many similar units in hospitals all around the country, working closely with the mothers to help them understand their babies' problems and accept them.

She seems to have a way with people, and they in turn find it easy to help her and to show kindness in helping others. Setting up the dialysis facility, which was crucial for treating kidney disease in children, helped her see the goodness in her fellow human beings.

## EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION

During her training as a doctor, in her early days, she was placed in a 'coloured ward', and she describes this time as like being forced to work in a straitjacket. “Hospitals like Groote Schuur had segregated wards, so as a student of colour I could not go to the white wards,” she says.

Her family had very little, but that did not diminish her ambition to study medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT) at a time when students of colour had few prospects of attending such institutions. At one point she was told that she could not be trained at UCT because the places allocated for people of colour were full. As a person of colour and a woman, these interactions fuelled her determination and encouraged her to try to change things at grassroots level in every position she held over the years.

And so she became an activist, highlighting injustices and the need for things to change. “My school principal used to say, 'Be quiet, you are talking too



much, you might be sent to prison', and I thought to myself 'If I go to prison, I will not be able to become a doctor. So I decided to quieten down and to work within the system and do whatever I had to do,' she says.

As an Indian female, she was subjected to all sorts of difficulties, and at one point she was rejected several times for a promotion despite being more than qualified and fully meeting the criteria. "That made me angry, but it also made me determined to do what was necessary for the children in my care."

After receiving the fellowship at the College of Medicine South Africa she was relieved to be able to work in a non-segregated environment.

## CURRENT AND RECENT WORK

Since officially retiring in 2010 from her position of Head of Department of Paediatrics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Adhikari has published on various topics, including HIV-infected infants, setting up breastmilk banks in resource-limited environments, and best practices in dealing with fever in children. She has continued to use her teaching skills to train undergraduate and postgraduate medical students in general paediatrics, as well as train sub-specialists, including other doctors, in neonatal and paediatric nephrology.

"When I learn something new myself, I always want to share the new knowledge with others." She has trained advanced midwives in post-exposure prophylaxis

(PEP) and neonatal Intensive Care Units in both public and private hospitals. She was also involved in establishing the Neonatal Outreach Programme that was accepted by the Department of Health as a training programme at the King Edward Hospital. The programme is still running.

She is currently a scientific advisor for the Postgraduate Office of the School of Clinical Medicine at University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) where she works with both undergraduate and postgraduate students. She is still hopeful that the lives of children born in South African hospitals will continue to improve as more professionals are trained and mothers are educated in improved neonatal facilities around the country.

Giving so much of herself to others and pushing forward in an often challenging career has not always been easy and she is thankful for the support she received from many different people.

"I would not have succeeded in my career had it not been for my husband," says a very appreciative Adhikari. "Having two small children and responding to night calls was quite a challenge, but because my husband is very supportive, we could do it together." She is also grateful to all the senior staff, heads of department and consultants who worked with her and encouraged her throughout her career.



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# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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