

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Global Forum for Bioethics Research Award (2015)
- Henry Knowles Beecher Award, Hastings Centre, New York (2011)
- Elected Honorary Foreign Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1996)

## DEFINING MOMENT

When he was inspired to grow beyond caring for individual patients to include an interest in bioethics and in improving population and planetary health in South Africa and the rest of the world.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He enjoys encouraging critical thinking in his students, especially the learning associated with the unlearning of old prejudices and ideas.

## SERENDIPITY SHAPING A CAREER

“Serendipity” is the answer you get when asking the humble Solomon Benatar how he has achieved his colourful career and impressive set of accolades. Serendipity re-shaped his life on multiple occasions throughout his career, from choosing to become a doctor through several shifts in career and interests.

Unlike getting married, he says that he was never really fully satisfied with many of his life and career changes, as he was frequently challenged by new horizons of intellectual interest. After starting out as a general practitioner in Port Elizabeth, he trained in anaesthesia at Groote Schuur Hospital and University of Cape Town (UCT) and received his fellowship from the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa.

As an anaesthetist he felt unfulfilled in not having any responsibility for patients after they left the operating theatre, so he went on to specialise in internal medicine and lung diseases. As luck would have it, he received a scholarship to pursue research in London, where he studied the mechanisms of gas exchange in critically ill patients and airflow in the lungs of asthmatics.

His humility has been challenged by the many awards peppered throughout his career, including the Henry Knowles Beecher Award for his lifetime contributions to ethics and the life sciences, as well as a career devoted to

excellence in scholarship, research, and ethical inquiry. His work transcending clinical medicine, including opposition to apartheid in healthcare in South Africa and his concern for human rights issues in South Africa did not go unnoticed and he was elected to honorary foreign memberships of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the US National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (now the US National Academy of Medicine).

After working in London for two years, he was offered long-term opportunities at the Brompton Hospital but he chose to return to South Africa in 1974, where he was appointed as a respiratory and critical care physician. The lack of access to sophisticated physiological research facilities in South Africa at the time nudged his research interest towards the public health aspects of lung diseases and how social factors affected health in South Africa.

Throughout his life, his colleagues have seen great potential in him, perhaps more than he saw in himself. He was caught by surprise when he was encouraged to apply for and was appointed to succeed his mentor, Professor Stuart Saunders, as Professor of Medicine at UCT in 1980. He found himself rebuilding the department by enabling younger colleagues to fill the gaps that had been left by the exodus of many highly accomplished physicians following the 1976 Soweto riots.

## LEARNING TO UNLEARN

“I enjoy unlearning myself, getting rid of old prejudices and old ideas, developing new perspectives and stimulating young people to unlearn and relearn. This requires open minds, rigorous thinking and a critical outlook that avoid dogma.”

His desire to tackle dogma led him to question the structure and funding of health care systems in South Africa, and to more deeply understand the impact of apartheid on health and health care.

“How could it be that there was such disparity in health in the country?” To find out, he studied the economic, political and health services contexts within which health care is embedded, as well as anthropological and sociological perspectives on medicine. His goal was to widen his knowledge beyond those





aspects of human health and disease that he had been trained to consider as a physician.

He also became aware of a burgeoning global literature on bioethics that was not exciting much interest in South Africa. He formed a multidisciplinary academic group and created a Bioethics Centre within the Department of Medicine at UCT. In 1994 and 1995 he was a Visiting Professor in Social Medicine at Harvard University, and a Fellow in Ethics and the Professions at the Kennedy School of Government where he studied with a small group of colleagues who worked in the fields of philosophy, law, business and medicine.

It seemed that those who saw potential in him were correct. In 1999, after 19 years as head of the Department of Medicine at UCT, he was confident that, together with close colleagues, he had successfully contributed what he valued dearly: training the next generation of clinicians to think critically and practice a high standard of clinical medicine. He left the department in good shape and in good hands when he resigned as head of the department some years before his retirement, while retaining his appointment as a full-time professor.

His experiences in bioethics have included annual invitations since 2000 to continue with his teaching, research and mentoring at the University of Toronto. This enabled him to secure significant grant funding for a ten-year period from the United States National Institutes of Health for a programme to build capacity in the International Research Ethics Network for Southern Africa (IRENSA).

Never one to settle down, even after mandatory retirement in 2007 as a professor at UCT, he continued on his evolving journey of interests in the political, ethical and other social forces shaping global and planetary health. His ongoing research and teaching at the University of Toronto broadened his horizons through collaborative projects and publications with anthropologists, sociologists, political economists and philosophers.

The serendipity that shaped his colourful career and life began at the age of 15 with his decision to study medicine, inspired by a general practitioner in his childhood village in what was then Southern Rhodesia. It is serendipitous, in turn, that through the world of medicine, the country of South Africa is home to this legend of medicine and critical thinking.

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# Legends of South African Science II

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