

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Established the discipline of clinical pharmacology in South Africa
- Chair of the South African Medicines Control Council for 18 years
- Led the investigation of the apartheid government's chemical and biological warfare programme for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

## DEFINING MOMENT

Folb's decision to combine medical practice and scientific research eventually propelled him to develop pharmacology into a clinical discipline in South Africa.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

Folb is a poet, author and artist. He writes Japanese *haiku* and *tanka*, as well as Danish *groom*-poetry. Folb has exhibited his art (linocuts, woodcuts and computer-generated paintings) on numerous occasions. He has published four books combining his art and poetry, two of them for children.

## GUARDIAN OF THE DRUGS

During a hike up Table Mountain in the early 1960s, Peter Folb wrestled with a difficult choice: Should he pursue the practice of medicine, which he was studying at the time, or focus on scientific research? By the end of the hike, he had resolved to combine his love for both disciplines.

Folb's unconventional path, along with his keen sense of justice and service, led him to the tumultuous intersection of science, health care and politics in South Africa. It wasn't always an easy path, but Folb believes it was important: "Very few doctors go into science and there's so much science that needs to be done."

## EARLY LIFE

Born in London in 1938 to a South African businessman and his English wife, Folb grew up in the shadow of World War II. When the war was over, the family moved to South Africa. Their arrival in Cape Town after a long sea voyage left

an indelible impression on the young boy, who became aware for the first time of the prejudice and injustice endemic to the country as he watched labourers working at the harbour.

Folb went to school in Johannesburg and began his studies at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). He transferred to the University of Cape Town (UCT) to learn from doctors including the legendary Chris Barnard, whom Folb describes as a genius: "He showed what could be done by brilliant application of oneself and one's career to development."

After graduating as a medical doctor in 1961, Folb entered into general practice in the Karoo town of Oudtshoorn. He also worked at a hospital that served a large and impoverished Coloured community. "I was inspired by our teachers, the work that had to be done and the situation of many of our patients," Folb recalls. "I was also inspired by the opportunity to do something about it."

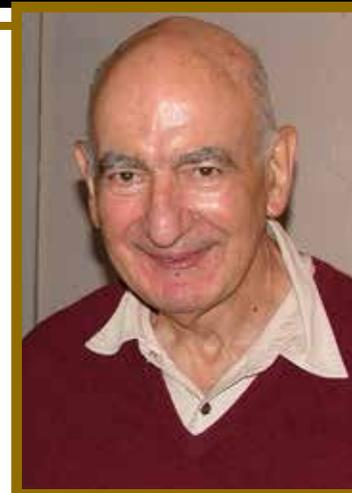
## A SHIFT IN FOCUS

The young doctor returned to Cape Town in 1963 and took a job as a registrar at Groote Schuur Hospital. Four years later, he decided to further his research overseas, taking a post as a senior lecturer at Guy's Hospital in London. He was awarded a Doctor of Medicine in research for his work on understanding the mechanisms of invasion of simple organisms in immune-suppressed patients.

"I was very interested in the early experience of heart transplantation. We gave patients intensely powerful drugs and suddenly simple organisms that usually caused little or no harm became highly invasive and pathogenic. I wanted to understand why."

## BUILDING A NEW CLINICAL DISCIPLINE

In 1976, after a five-year period working as a physician and researcher in Israel, Folb returned to South Africa. He was appointed Professor of Pharmacology at UCT: "I got that post on the understanding that I would develop pharmacology, which at that time was a basic science, into a clinical discipline." And that's what he spent the next 27 years doing.



Folb gained an international reputation as a scientist and leading expert on drug development and safety. He was appointed chairperson of South Africa's Medicines Control Council (MCC) in 1981, a post he held for 18 years. Under his direction, South Africa became a world leader in drug regulation and the MCC became the go-to reference and training centre for the World Health Organization (WHO) in the developing world.

In the early 1990s, Folb was approached to assist the WHO in its fight against eradicable diseases. "I did a lot of work with them in their efforts to ensure vaccine safety worldwide and eradicate diseases, including polio."

## SCIENCE AND POLITICS COLLIDE

In the late 1990s, two more challenges landed at Folb's door: A battle over the testing of a controversial Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) drug and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) investigation into the apartheid government's chemical and biological warfare programme, headed by medical doctor Wouter Basson.

Folb was tasked with heading the investigation team that sifted through three trunks full of Basson's documentation. He set up a system for examining Basson's records and what he'd done and determined what the scientific approach would be to his actions.

He also apologised on behalf of the MCC to the family of slain activist Steve Biko, who was tragically let down by the doctors who saw him when he was in police detention. "I was at the TRC to speak about medicine, apartheid and forgiveness," he says. "It was very satisfying to me to be able to do that on a scientific level."

At around the same time, Folb also dealt with another charged issue: The Virodene scandal. The MCC tested claims made by a drug manufacturer,

peddling an industrial solvent as a cure for AIDS. "It was hopeless," Folb says, "they didn't understand what they were doing and had made some fundamental mistakes, so we stopped it."

What should have been a clear-cut case instead became a highly political affair. The MCC stood firm against government pressure and refused to allow testing. "It was loyalty that drove me to take this position," says Folb. "I'm very pleased I stood up for what was right. I don't have any regrets around Virodene." Nevertheless, Folb's brave stand eventually took its toll; when his term as MCC Chair ended in 1998, he was not reappointed. He believes it was the right time for him to leave.

## UNEXPECTED HONOUR

Folb continued his work with the WHO and UCT until his retirement from the university, having travelled and worked in 35 different countries and supervised more than 80 Master's and PhD students to completion: "I'm deeply grateful that I had the opportunity to serve and that I was able to create the opportunity for others."

From 2004, he worked full-time at the South African Medical Research Council for another nine years, guiding and developing South African programmes for new drug development.

In 2016, the Emeritus Professor received an unexpected but very welcome surprise when he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science degree by UCT. "I was thrilled by it," he says. Folb had qualified as a doctor, but never as a scientist. At last he had managed to combine his passions for patient care and science. It had taken more than half a century, but the young man on Table Mountain finally achieved the goals he had set out for himself.

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# Legends of South African Science II

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