

Fred Clarke (1925–1992)

(A eulogy delivered at his funeral by Trevor Warman)

It is fitting that we should gather in this beautiful church on Broadway to pay tribute to our much loved and admired Fred. This central part of Durban North was his village, and he was a vital part of the community for more than 42 years — ever since, as an enthusiastic 25-year-old, he opened his first shop, the Kensington Pharmacy, on Broadway. In those days there were only eight shops here, very few houses below Kensington Drive, and no Glenashley, La Lucia or Glen Hills. He was a man not only of all seasons, but of Durban North. Two years after opening in Broadway, he started Ellis Park Pharmacy in an area opened up by the same developers of Durban North.

With his abiding interest in people and medicine, it was almost inevitable that Fred would take up medicine as a career. At the age of 31 he moved with his family to Cape Town and enrolled at university, but spent every holiday back in Durban running the two pharmacies.

During his pharmacy career Fred built up a reputation for having genuine concern for, and love of, people. The residents of Durban North who supported him did so because of his enthusiasm, his charisma and his unflinching and wonderful sense of humour. He was known for his own Crucible products, and



Dr F.C. Clarke

(Photograph: Mrs Shirley Clarke)

a cough mixture which he dispensed proved so popular that it was top of the market for generations.

In 1948 Fred had to cope with the devastating shock of having his left leg amputated because of radium burns following a wartime injury. That episode of his life is a tale of great heroism and courage. It also gave him, in later years, a deep understanding of the pains and tribulations of his patients. Within hours of the leg being amputated he was sitting up in bed entertaining no fewer than nine friends. And never at any time thereafter did he feel bitter or complain about the crippling and painful loss of his leg. When one considers that he was a hurdler of note during his schooldays at the Durban High School, setting a record which stood for many years, one can really appreciate his fortitude. Someone once dared him to hitch-hike from Cape Town to Durban, wooden leg and all. He was dropped on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg and hobbled 20 miles before getting another lift!

Many stories were told of his artificial leg. When Fred was inducted into the Provincial Council, Peter McKenzie was delegated to march with him to be presented and sworn in. A mistake was made, however, and instead of Peter and Fred marching up the aisle good leg to good leg, they marched up bad side to bad side — thus swerving outwards on one step and bumping each other on the next. In an aside, the Leader of the Opposition was heard to say ‘At least you have one good pair of legs between you’!

Fred’s career at the University of Cape Town was one triumph after another.

In 1961 he graduated amongst the top ten students, was first in anaesthetics, and was awarded the gold medal. He then served as a houseman at Addington before opening his successful practice in Durban North. His patients worshipped him, and all the children simply loved him. There are many grateful parents today saying 'he saved my daughter's life', 'he cured my son', 'he gave my child such good advice'.

Yet Fred might very well have been lost to the people of Durban North. He considered two assistant specialist posts, offered to outstanding men in their fields, but ultimately turned both down. Why? Because he was a marvellous family doctor, one of the few to continue home visits, and because he wished to dedicate himself to general medical practice.

Fred always had a hankering to speak, which he did very well, and to represent people in presenting their views. He was a member of the Durban North Ratepayers' Association and was asked many times to stand for Parliament. He decided, however, to serve his country at provincial level. In 1977 and 1981 he won the seats of Umhlanga and Durban North respectively. He was then appointed Member of the Executive Committee, holding the portfolios of Health, Hospitals, Museums and Libraries. Great was the joy among provincial medical staff and hospitals at Fred's appointment. He was the first doctor in over thirty years to hold the post. Fred was one of the last elected MECs of Natal, serving for five years before the Provincial Council system was abolished. He was a fearsome and knowledgeable debater, never ever varying from his rigid standards of behaviour. He was one of the co-founders of the Natal-KwaZulu Indaba and served on its steering committee.

He was also active in pharmaceutical and medical politics, and achieved the unique honour, at different times, of being President of the Natal branches of both the Pharmaceutical Society and the Medical Association. One of the proudest moments of Fred's life was when he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Pharmaceutical Society for outstanding services to medicine and the community whilst a practising doctor.

He was also responsible for establishing the Natal Ambulance Service, and served as its first chairman. At the time of the accident which ultimately led to his death he was president of the St John's Ambulance Association, a member of the Natal Sharks Board, of the Coronary Care Unit and of the Adoption Committee. His many interests included freemasonry, which he served with faithful dedication for most of his life. He was Sovereign Grand Inspector-General of Scottish Masonry in Natal.

As a result of the acute pain Fred so frequently and uncomplainingly suffered, he supported the Addington Pain Clinic. Because the clinic always needed financial support, Fred focused interest on it and encouraged contributions for its survival. He did not wish to have memorials, but the Prince Mshiyeni Hospital, Umlazi stands as a record of his support and encouragement. I know that he always regretted that the training hospital planned for Cato Manor had been scrapped.

Fred had many hobbies. He became interested in military uniforms and memorabilia and his collections are now housed in the Natal Provincial Museum Services in Pietermaritzburg. Shirley, his wife, collected apothecary articles over a long period, and these are now in the Talana Museum.

The love of his family was a strong part of Fred's life, particularly his grandchildren. None of the family will ever forget the fairy garden that Fred built. One opened the tiny door of the mushroom house, and there were the two little gnomes. 'Peepa' will be sadly missed by all his grandchildren.

I do not need to speak here of the circumstances of Fred's passing. We salute the family for the fortitude with which they have borne the last years in which he lay in a coma. It was a landmark decision of the Natal Supreme Court which at length authorised the discontinuance of support systems for an existence which had long ceased to enjoy any of the qualities of human life. This will become an important legal precedent. As one who had signed a 'living will', Fred Clarke would undoubtedly have approved of the outcome.

TREVOR WARMAN