



Professor Patrick Smythe

## *Patrick Montrose Smythe (1913–1999)*

Pat was born in Pietermaritzburg and educated at Merchiston and Cordwalles Preparatory schools. From there he went to Michaelhouse where he matriculated at the age of 16 with a first class matric and represented his school at rugby in the first fifteen.

He went to the then Natal University College in Pietermaritzburg where he graduated with a first class BSc Honours. He also played rugby for the University first team. He furthered his studies at Cambridge and the London Hospital and obtained an MB ChB.

At the outbreak of World War 2 he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and served in the United Kingdom, and was then posted to Nigeria with the Royal West Frontier Force. Shortly thereafter, he was sent with the Gold Coast Regiment to Burma. Pat related a story that the practice was to take the injured to base hospital carried in blankets slung between two poles. He decided that a critically injured officer would die en route if transported in this fashion. Ever resourceful, Pat designed and constructed a bamboo raft and accompanied his patient, floating down the Arakan River to the base hospital. Happily, the patient

survived, but it resulted in Pat having to walk back alone through the jungle to return to his unit.

After the war, he went back to the London Hospital, where he obtained his MRCP, specialising in Paediatrics. In 1949, he moved to Cape Town, where he was a Research Fellow at the University of Cape Town. In 1951 he joined the Department of Paediatrics at a time when paediatrics was regarded as a minor discipline at Groote Schuur Hospital and the Medical School of the University of Cape Town. He played an important role in promoting paediatrics and lending academic credibility to the discipline both nationally and internationally.

As a researcher Pat had many innovative ideas which he followed with enthusiasm. His major research interests were in tetanus and nutrition. He developed techniques with Professor Arthur Bull, and later refined them, resulting in a drop in the mortality of patients with neonatal tetanus from 90% to 10%, the best reported survival rates at that time. He showed that undernutrition during infancy inhibits brain growth and subsequent intellectual development in some patients with severe kwashiorkor, and he contributed to the understanding of the immunological changes that take place in this disease. This research received international recognition and was commented on in the *New York Times*.

In 1964 his doctoral thesis was accepted by the University of Cambridge as the best MD thesis and he was awarded the Raymond Horton Smith prize. Two of his thirty-three publications have been identified and accorded Citation Classics by the Science Citation Index Philadelphia as amongst the most widely quoted in world medical literature.

He was promoted to Associate Professor of Paediatrics while he was working at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital. In 1968 he was appointed Professor of Paediatrics at the University of Natal and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in 1974. In 1988 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Faculty of Paediatrics of the College of Medicine of South Africa.

In 1978, on retirement from the university, he spent six months at the Harare Hospital, and subsequently held teaching sessions at Tygerberg, Baragwanath, Red Cross Childrens' Hospital and King Edward VIII. He then retired to his beloved farm Allandale at Nottingham Road, but continued with paediatric work doing ward rounds at rural hospitals including Emmaus, Tugela Ferry, Charles Johnson Memorial and Ngwelezane hospitals, thereby continuing with his contribution to medical education and care for underprivileged children. This commitment required considerable stamina and travelling for a man in his seventies and eighties.

Medicine was but one facet of Pat, truly a renaissance man. He was not only interested and knowledgeable, but was passionate about many and varied subjects.

His interests ranged from science and medicine to agriculture and botany; from wild life to antiques and fine art; from literature and music to gardening; from philosophy to sport; from history and politics, to education and children. He enjoyed hunting, shooting and fishing — but there was something in which he had no interest at all, and that was his personal wardrobe! Who else but Pat

would attend an overseas congress as the keynote speaker, wearing khaki longs, held up by baling twine?! Above all else, he had an abiding interest in and love of people and his family, its heritage and future. For instance, he and a cousin recently spent months researching and restoring the family cemetery on the original Smythe family farm, Strathearn. Their efforts culminated in a wonderful, two-hundred-strong gathering of the Smythe clan where Pat gave a talk and planted a Pepperwell Oak.

One of his greatest joys was welcoming guests to Allandale. Nothing gave him more pleasure than driving guests around the farm and also debating issues at the dining room table. No topic was closed to his open and enquiring mind — whether moral, philosophical, Christian or topical matters. At his memorial service, Professor John Hansen said ‘As a person Pat was a wonderful warm friend of countless colleagues and families. Many of these and VIPs from overseas visited him at Allandale. This kind and generous man, who can be regarded as one of the greats in South African paediatrics during the last 50 years, will be sadly missed.’

SUSAN SMYTHE