

Obituary – Alan Flisher: A Mental Health Pioneer



Alan Flisher, who held the position of the Sue Struengmann Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry & Mental Health at the University of Cape Town, died on Sunday 18th April 2010 of leukaemia after a relatively short period of illness. His death robbed South Africa and the region of a remarkable scientist, academic, mentor and mental health professional.

An absolutely prodigious researcher with more than 200 peer-reviewed articles and over 70 books or book chapters to his name, Alan pioneered a much neglected field in South Africa – that of public mental health. He was born in 1957 in Cape Town and first studied Mathematics at UCT in a career that took him through clinical psychology, medicine and finally specialising in psychiatry in 1995, with a sub-specialisation in Child and Adolescent psychiatry in 1998. He was responsible for running a variety of psychiatric services in the Metropole, including the psychiatric emergency services at Groote Schuur Hospital for 10 years and then the Child and Adolescent psychiatry service at Red Cross Children's Hospital from 2003.

It was in the field of public mental health that Alan did groundbreaking work for the World Health Organisation and for the Department of Health in South Africa, both provincial and national, particularly in developing norms and standards for mental health services, evidence-based guidelines for mental health services delivery and evaluations of public mental health interventions. He was also highly regarded for his expertise in the field of suicide epidemiology and prevention and established multiple collaborations in research exploring the links between substance abuse, HIV prevention and mental health, particularly among adolescents.

He played a key role in collaborations internationally and across Africa to build the discipline of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, teaching and examining in Tanzania and Kenya and training postgraduate students from neighbouring countries. A large multi-country study under his leadership was funded to develop and implement mental health policy in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia, with a focus on breaking the cycle of mental ill-health and poverty. His research focus was on adolescent health through the multidisciplinary Adolescent Health Research Unit, which he directed for 8 years. His postgraduate supervision was extensive, with 24 PhD or Masters students supervised to completion and a further 18 students under Alan's supervision at the time of his death. His contributions to the discipline of mental health were evidenced in his service on numerous editorial boards, conference scientific committees and in his reviews for no less than 47 different journals in the field.

Alan was the recipient of numerous awards, including, for example, the Alan Pifer award from UCT in acknowledgement of a scholar whose work contributes to the welfare and advancement of South Africa's disadvantaged groups. His commitment to social justice remained with him throughout his life, from having been active in anti-apartheid mental health organisations as a student and mental health graduate to applying his professional skills as an adolescent and child psychiatrist to the quest for solutions to the pressing problems facing youth and children from the most marginalised communities in the country and the region. He was a man of unflinching integrity, and this extended from his stand on matters of policy and principle to his every day dealings with

colleagues, students and patients. Even in his illness, he retained the ability to feel and express moral indignation at social injustices and was pre-occupied with what action he could take to redress some of these issues upon his recovery.

Despite his extensive professional and academic involvement, he also made sure he had protected time for his family. He is survived by his wife Mehrunisa, his children Adam and Khaleila, stepsons Zubin and Sirhan, his parents, Jeanne and John, his sister Alison and his brother John. Always a devoted and loving father and husband, his loss will be sorely felt by many people whom Alan touched in different ways – not only his family, both close and extended, but also his students, his colleagues and his friends, for whom he always seemed to find time. We will remember him for unique combination of traits – compassion, loyalty, integrity and intellect. His premature death leaves us all the poorer.

The funeral service will be held at the St Michael's Parish Church in Rouwkoop Rd, Rondebosch on Thursday 22nd April at 10am. His family have requested that instead of flowers, donations be directed to the Red Cross Children's Hospital Trust.

Leslie London, Crick Lund and Laura Czerniewicz.