



The power of one good person

One of the most influential of South African doctors, Professor Frances Ames, has died and this issue of the *SAMJ* carries two contributions in her memory (pp. 14 and 48). Frances was often a controversial figure and would be the first to acknowledge her faults. She was never a high-profile person in medical organisations, and committees were not her scene. How then was she able to wield such influence and what were her contributions? Since aspects of her life are covered in the other articles it seems appropriate to focus on some universal lessons from her example.

We need no reminder about how bad things were a few short years ago! In the latter years of apartheid, taking people to court for their opposition to the system was replaced by undercover activities literally to eliminate such opponents. The extent of these operations was revealed to the public at large only with the evidence uncovered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The most notable case from the point of view of the medical profession was the death as a result of injuries while in detention of Steve Biko, one of the most important and influential leaders in South Africa. The responses by the Medical Association of South Africa and the South African Medical and Dental Council to the circumstances surrounding his death and the role played by some of the medical practitioners resulted in huge rifts within the profession. Alternative professional groups (e.g. the National Medical and Dental Association) were formed and many influential people and organisations encouraged international isolation of South African medicine. The successful court case forcing the SAMDC to revise its earlier decisions of no blame to the medical practitioners was mounted by a group of leading academics. In this action Frances Ames led by conviction and example.

Frances strongly believed in Burke's aphorism: 'The only thing for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing'. The court challenge was not without its controversy, as it was perceived as focusing on the doctors, whereas the security forces were the main culprits. However, history has vindicated the action. Perhaps the most enduring lesson for South African medicine was the clarification of the roles of medical practitioners when there is a question of dual responsibilities. This is now embodied *inter alia* in the SAMA Code of Conduct (p. 51) and in legal interpretations of doctors' responsibilities as illustrated in the article by McQuoid-Mason *et al.* (p. 41). The first lesson, therefore, is that one should be prepared to act on one's convictions.

When reading codes of conduct and legal interpretations of our responsibilities, the way that professionals should act seems perfectly reasonable and clear. However, when faced

with the realities, things may be quite different. For the court case and for other actions which responded to social injustice, Frances endured much criticism from the politicians, from the public and, most hurtful, from senior medical colleagues who would normally be highly ethical practitioners. She also received threats. But she was not only prepared to put her career on the line, she was even prepared to mortgage her house to pay for legal costs. Stuart Gilder, editor of the *SAMJ* during the Biko years, who had spent most of World War II in German prisoner of war camps, used to say that one's actions are inclined to be very different when a gun is held against one's head. Amnesty International has recorded that health professionals are especially liable to become victims of arbitrary warrantless arrest and imprisonment. Persecution can include disappearance, torture or politically motivated murder. The cause is their professional position, which is incompatible with lawlessness and social injustice. The second lesson is therefore that one's actions in challenging injustice may not always result in glory, and may require considerable courage and willingness to sacrifice.

The third lesson is that the pursuit of one's convictions may require considerable patience and endurance. Throughout her career Frances was at odds with what she regarded as the absurdity of the drug laws. Initially as a lone voice, she campaigned for the scientific investigation of cannabis for therapeutic purposes. After several decades the debate in South Africa and internationally has moved a long way, though still short of her viewpoints on the matter. Her request was honoured that her ashes mixed with hemp seed be scattered in the grounds of Valkenberg Hospital!

Another lesson that we can learn from Frances was not evident in her public presence. She was an extraordinarily compassionate person, as attested to by innumerable people who sought guidance and help from her in her private and professional capacities. Not only her life experiences but her innate warm human qualities enabled her to provide wisdom and comfort to many in need.

The main lesson from an inspiring person and an illustrious career can perhaps be summed up by paraphrasing Burke's quote: 'each person can make a big difference by doing something good'.

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