

In memoriam – Dr Sean Cheevers: 1 Jul 1942 – 4 Feb 2020



Contributors: **Devin and Shonagh Cheevers** – Sean's son and daughter; **Dr Kevin Rainier** – OMP, SASOM KZN Chapter ExCo, and long-time friend; **Sr Jane Knight Taylor** – OHNP, SASOHN, SAACHS, UKZN colleague and long-time friend; **Carol Meyer** - long-time friend

Born in 1942, Dr Edward John Cheevers was the eldest son of Thomas and Delia who owned a small shop in Athenry, a town just outside Galway, on the west coast of Ireland. He had a happy childhood with his sister, Eileen, and his two younger brothers, Brendan and Thomas. Edward John Cheevers was called 'Sean' which is the Irish equivalent of John, by his mother, and it was by this name that he was affectionately known by all friends and family.

Sean attended St Mary's College (aged 12 to 17), taking the train from Athenry to Galway every day, and working in his parents' shop in the afternoons and weekends, close to the famous archway in Athenry. He was not expected to get a medical degree, and was instead encouraged to join the local County Council. However, he chose to cycle to college and back to complete his medical degree at the National University of Ireland in Galway. He graduated in 1973, proudly flanked by his parents, and sporting a fashionable 1970s moustache.

During his years at medical school, Sean looked dashing and dapper in his convertible sports car, attending local dances and invoking envy from his brother, Thomas. One day Thomas decided that he should have a turn in the sports car, only to end up in a ditch and needing to be rescued by his irate older brother! Sean loved to sing and dance and play the piano; his favourite tune was 'From a Jack to a King' by Ned Miller. Soon after graduation, he married Ruth Faherty, from Oughterard, near Galway.

During a house call in Dublin one night, he was told about an opportunity in a small mining town called Mangula (now Mhangura) in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) – a world away from Ireland. Taking a leap of faith, he visited Mangula and was impressed by the small hospital, nurses and doctors in the town. He also fell in love with Africa.

Sean and Ruth moved to Rhodesia in 1977, a bold move for two young people from small rural villages in Ireland. Outside of a brief sabbatical in the UK, Sean would remain in Africa for the rest of his life. In 1979, after an enjoyable couple of years in Rhodesia, Sean and Ruth moved to South Africa where Sean had an offer to be a medical officer with the Anglo American Corporation Western Deep Levels in Johannesburg. He worked for Anglo American for seven years.

A scholar throughout his life, Sean completed a Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in 1980, a Diploma in Public Health in 1981, and a Diploma in Occupational Health in 1984, all from the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1981, he was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (London). In 1986, Sean moved to Durban with his wife and two children (Devin and Shonagh), to work for the Illovo Sugar Company.

In 2001, Sean took a two-year sabbatical in Plymouth, England where his son was completing his undergraduate degree. Sean worked as a medical officer at the Medical School and added an Advanced Diploma in Occupational Medicine from the University of Manchester to his professional qualifications.

He returned to South Africa in 2004, as an occupational health specialist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), until 2017. He also provided primary health care to students at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine from 2004 to 2019, and was contracted to the African Health Research Institute (AHRI) at UKZN where he was involved with setting up world-class laboratories until his death.



Dr Sean Cheevers

Sean played a major role in guiding the UKZN registered nurses to acquire their dispensing licenses, and was very involved with the South African Association of Campus Health Services (SAACHS), and with organising the KZN Regional Conference in January 2020. He developed the SAACHS website, an active website used by SAACHS branches, nationally, and was instrumental in preparing a memorandum of agreement for UKZN, University of Zululand, Durban University of Technology (DUT), and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). Another of Sean's achievements was the development of clinic software which included occupational health, primary healthcare and HIV monitoring, in collaboration with the Information and Communication Services Division

(ICS) of UKZN.

Sean was a dedicated member of The South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM) and served on the executive committee (ExCo) of what was initially known as the 'Coastal Branch' (now the KZN Chapter) from the late 1980s. He was the branch secretary for a number of years and became treasurer on his return to South Africa after his sabbatical. He went on to become chair of the KZN Chapter and served on the national ExCo of SASOM. He continued to serve as a valuable member of the KZN Chapter ExCo and was still an active member at the time of his death.

He was bestowed with the 'Occupational Hygienist of the Year' award by the National Occupational Safety Association (NOSA) in 1994. He represented Business South Africa (BSA) on the Compensation Board from the time the Board was established until leaving for his sabbatical in Plymouth.

Sean continued to complete courses, attend workshop and participate in seminars to keep himself informed of developments in medicine, including good clinical practice courses, a laboratory safety and chemical grades seminar, a dispensing practitioners' course, an HIV/AIDS clinical management programme, and a course on integrated management of tuberculosis, HIV and STIs in the primary healthcare setting. He set up his own company, OHA-Occupational Health and Safety Consultancy Services' in 2006.

He worked as a consultant occupational medical practitioner to Sappi at the Stanger Mill, and was a valuable member of the Centre of Excellence for Health for Sappi South Africa. In 2009, he received a Certificate of Recognition from Sappi for his contribution and dedication to employee wellbeing, and was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation during a UKZN leadership course, in 2010.

Sean was a colleague, friend and mentor and was immensely respected. The nurses he worked with describe him as being humble, kind, dignified, passionate and involved, a true medical officer, often lending an ear when advice was needed. He was an advocate for occupational health nursing practitioners and was always willing to give advice based on his entrenched expertise, vast knowledge and access to his national and international professional networks. He worked right up until his death, after practising medicine for 47 years and helping numerous people along the way.

Sean was an avid sports enthusiast, enjoying fishing, golf, tennis and squash; he was a founder member of the South African Sports Association. In 2016 and again in 2018, he became a grandfather. He was at his happiest when talking to his friends, colleagues and the nurses with whom he worked about his children. Sean, you have left a deep legacy and will be sorely missed by all the people whose lives you touched.