

Tribute to Anthony Cantrell (1943–2026)

Professor Anthony (Tony) Cantrell retired from the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH) in November 2007 as Head of the Information Services Section, after more than three decades of dedicated service to occupational health and to the Institute. His retirement marked the end of an era defined by intellectual rigour, generosity of spirit, and an unwavering commitment to worker health and safety.

Tony possessed an extraordinary breadth of knowledge across multiple disciplines, particularly toxicology, industrial processes, and information sciences. He was not only a scholar of remarkable depth, but also an exceptional educator and mentor. When he left the NIOH, his absence was felt deeply – not only for his technical expertise, but also for his collegiality, mentorship, and wry humour, which often brought perspective and balance to complex scientific discussions.

Institutional legacy

Under Tony's leadership, the Information Services Section became a national and regional hub for occupational health knowledge. During his tenure, the NIOH housed South Africa's national reference library for occupational health and functioned as a National Resource Centre, maintaining publications from several international agencies and providing regular reporting and consultancy services.

The Institute also served as the national International Labour Organization's (ILO's) International Occupational Safety and Health Information Centre (CIS), the knowledge management arm of the ILO SafeWork Programme, ensuring access to critical information for the prevention of occupational injuries and diseases. In addition, it operated as a clearing house for occupational health information across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region – a vital service in the pre-internet era – and managed a query-handling service providing technical occupational health information to practitioners throughout the region.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM PROFESSOR SPO KGALAMONO

To many colleagues, Tony was far more than a respected scholar – he was a mentor, confidant, and friend. He affectionately called me 'Spokie', a nickname that still echoes in my heart. Shortly after I completed my postgraduate diploma as his student, he invited me to co-lecture the programme with him. That professional partnership continued for 15 years, until his formal retirement from teaching. Yet our friendship and mentorship endured long after.

He remained a constant presence in my life and, in many ways, was like a father to me. He often called simply to check in, to ask how I was managing in a new role, or to offer quiet words of wisdom when they were most needed. His kindness, generosity, and steady encouragement left an indelible mark on all who had the privilege of knowing him.



'Professorial kindred spirits' – Spo Kgalamono and Tony Cantrell

Photograph: courtesy of Prof. Spo Kgalamono

Through these initiatives, Tony strengthened national and regional capacity to access and apply evidence-based occupational health information. Practitioners, students, workers, managers, health and safety representatives, and union officials alike benefited from his commitment to making reliable knowledge accessible.

Academic and professional contributions

A longstanding member of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) community, Tony completed his PhD at Wits and later served as a Visiting Professor in the Wits School of Public Health. In this role, he mentored generations of students and practitioners in occupational and environmental health, contributing significantly to the development of the discipline in South Africa and beyond.

His contributions to the understanding and prevention of occupational lung disease, particularly asbestos-related disease, remain an enduring part of his professional legacy. Throughout his career, his work reflected a profound and principled commitment to public and worker health.

The teacher and the man

Tony was, above all, a devoted teacher. Many former students still recall with remarkable clarity his detailed explanations of the health effects of hexavalent chromium – a testament to his ability to make complex toxicological concepts both engaging and memorable. Colleagues frequently sought his advice on the health effects of chemicals, confident that he would respond not only with a clear explanation of the underlying pathophysiology, but also with thoughtful guidance on exposure control and clinical management.

He related to everyone with warmth and ease. Intelligent without arrogance and authoritative without intimidation, Tony had a distinctive sense of humour that was often quite disarming – a gentle reminder that scientific rigour and humanity must always go hand in hand.

Life beyond the profession

Beyond his professional achievements, Tony was a man with wide interests and sincere personal commitments. He was a lover of nature and approached the world with a fierce curiosity, always eager to learn, explore, and understand.

As a dedicated husband, father, and grandfather, he remained ever present and engaged in the lives of those he cherished, offering them the same warmth, wisdom, and steady support that he extended to colleagues and students, always with patience and humility.

For many years, Tony was an enthusiastic runner and cyclist, embracing the outdoors with the same energy and discipline that characterised his professional life. Although health challenges eventually required him to slow down, his spirit of determination and zest for life remained undiminished.

Enduring impact

Even after his formal retirement, Tony remained a valued mentor, advisor, sounding board, and true friend to colleagues from the NIOH and Wits. His influence extended across institutions, generations, and borders.

Tony will be deeply missed. His legacy lives on in the knowledge he shared, the professionals he mentored, and the countless workers whose lives are healthier and safer because of his dedication.

Rest in eternal peace, dear colleague and friend, you will be forever in our hearts and minds. 🕊️

Spo Kgalamono and Claudina Nogueira

A PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM PROFESSOR EMERITUS DAVID REES

I count myself very lucky to have known and worked with Tony over many years. He was warm, supportive, humorous, and interesting; the kind of person who made you look forward to being with him, even if drudging through writing the NIOH Annual Reports – a thankless task he shouldered for years.

I never fully thanked Tony for establishing the Information Services at the NIOH. He was ideal: he had a large network of colleagues – and friends – in South Africa and far afield, and an unmatched depth and breadth of knowledge and experience on work processes, exposures, and real-world toxicology. Tony was ready to share his expertise with whoever needed it – many did, including me; I learnt a great deal from him. When Tony retired, I said he was irreplaceable, and he was.

Tony was wonderful with students – he really enjoyed being with them and they enjoyed being with him. Many stayed in contact years after being in his classes, and all of them gained professionally from a uniquely equipped teacher and advisor.

The NIOH, the Wits School of Public Health, and Tony's many friends and colleagues are going to miss him. Our thoughts are with Jemima Cantrell and Tony's family.



'A rose amongst the thorns' – Tony Cantrell with colleagues and friends from the NIOH at the celebration of his 80th birthday, recalling many years of shared work, camaraderie, and humour. L to R: Prof. Gill Nelson, Prof. Spo Kgalamono, Mrs Jemima Cantrell, Prof. Tony Cantrell, Prof. Halina Röllin, Prof. Jill Murray, and Ms Claudina Nogueira

Photograph: courtesy of Prof. Spo Kgalamono