

## Editorial

### Obituary: Professor Peter R. Mason PhD., F.R.C.P. (Path.)

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Peter Mason leaves us a legacy created by his decades of teaching, training and research in many areas of communicable disease and public health in developing countries, and in his later years, in the health research and training practice itself. Although he started out in England doing a Bachelor degree in Biology at York University, he completed his Master and PhD degrees at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. After a short time in the UK, he returned to Africa. Peter Mason joined the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) in 1978 as Lecturer in the Department of Medical Microbiology; in 1984 he was promoted to the rank of Senior Lecturer. His successful career in the Department of Medical Microbiology continued with a promotion to Associate Professor in 1990, and Full Professor in 1993. He joined the Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences in 1996 as Full Professor and was the Departmental Professorial chair until he retired from UZ service in 2013. Professor Mason was the Chairman of the Department of Medical Microbiology from 1985 to 1987 and of the Medical Laboratory Sciences Department from 2000 to 2004. By the time of his death Prof. Peter Mason had over 200 peer reviewed scientific publications. The University of Hanoi in Vietnam awarded him an Honorary Professorial degree for his outreach teaching programs and excellence in research in collaboration with several medical schools and research institutes in Vietnam.

His colleagues and friends in Zimbabwe reflect with respect and gratitude on the important role that he has played in sustaining and expanding science in the country and the region. Peter remained in Zimbabwe and continued his work in microbiology, immunology, science and public health with a number of grants from different agencies and countries. At UZ, he served on and contributed to numerous academic committees,



such as the Higher Degrees Committee. Scores of doctors, nurses and technologists graduated from UZ having benefited from the mentorship, advice and august example that he set for practice, research and responsibility to society.

Together with other colleagues interested in promoting health research in Zimbabwe, Peter established the Biomedical Research and Training Institute (BRTI), which gained the Cabinet approval in 1994. The goal of this project was to provide a point of reference for research and training grants from many international and national sources, which would have efficient and transparent management, in order to build up and improve capability and expertise for research in

Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. The fact that BRTI is still functioning, 23 years since its establishment is a testament to Peter's dedication and innovation skills. The BRTI has developed into a fully-fledged institute including a laboratory focused on microbiology, particularly tuberculosis, HIV, community development malaria, animal welfare as well as a training institute offering national and regional training courses. The BRTI has given courses on research design, biostatistics and data management, disease control, research ethics, presentation and publication, among others.

During the turn of the millennium, the BRTI secured the ICOHRTA research and training grant from National Institutes of Health, USA, which not only enhanced the training function of BRTI but also provided a stipend to UZ post-graduate students, making it possible for them to remain in their country and to pursue a research career. This grant greatly helped to strengthen the BRTI through a ten-year period. Other BRTI partners included Stanford University in California, Oxford University in the UK, University of Sassari in Italy, and others in Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway and partnerships with other regional universities and research centres. Peter supervised 25 UZ students through the years, most of whom are currently in the academic field in Zimbabwe, the region or abroad. Peter also worked with his colleagues to secure funding to sustain research in Zimbabwe and to provide careers for many local scientists. According to many, the BRTI is a unique and invaluable resource, and its staff is fully committed to continue and build up on this part of Peter's wonderful legacy, offering their full dedication and energies.

One of the key projects promoted by Peter was to develop an International Center of Excellence for Malaria Research in Zambia and Zimbabwe in collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the US, with BRTI managing research in the Mutasa Area. The products of the project have helped the Ministry of Health and Child Care to manage malaria again, after a major increase in prevalence in the early 2000s.

Another key project concerned the research on the spread and control of the HIV epidemic in Zimbabwe, particularly in Manicaland province, since the early 1990's. Initially based at the Blair Research Institute, the project moved to the BRTI when it started to study a general population cohort in 1997. This project would never have achieved what it has achieved without the solid platform that Peter established at the BRTI and managed to sustain for many years in the face of the

many challenges arising in Zimbabwe through those years. The laboratory that Peter set up and oversaw at BRTI provided a reliable, high-quality, state-of-the-art HIV and STI diagnostic services; while Peter himself made many valued contributions to the scientific output of the project, which includes about 200 scientific papers including several landmark publications in leading international journals such as *Science* and *The Lancet*.

The research results also had significant impacts on national policy-formation, for example, in providing evidence for the establishment of Zimbabwe's National AIDS Trust Fund (AIDS Levy) in the late 1990s, and Zimbabwe's national cash transfer programme to support vulnerable households in the early 2010.

Tuberculosis was always a topic of great interest to Peter, and the BRTI carried out numerous studies on tuberculosis diagnosis and treatment, and recently carried out the national tuberculosis survey.

Many more projects and achievements had the benefit of the BRTI's support and Peter's wisdom and guidance. Information about them can be found on the BRTI website, [www.brti.co.zw](http://www.brti.co.zw).

One of Peter's special interests was research ethics. After taking special training on the topic at Harvard, he established the Institutional Review Board for health research in Zimbabwe and managed its function for its initial years. He also taught research ethics, not only in Zimbabwe but also in the neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, and in distant places including Vietnam and Laos.

As a Senior Editor and Founder editor of the *Journal of Infection in Developing Countries*, he worked with his Italian and international colleagues to promote publication of research conducted in developing countries, while mentoring the authors who submitted papers to the journal.

As a manager and scientist Peter Mason supported his colleagues and staff with wisdom and dedication. His expertise was sought after as a teacher and role model for other developing nations, however, his heart was in Zimbabwe. It is in this country that he inspired and mentored many young researchers and worked so hard to demonstrate that when properly supported, developing countries can also produce international quality research. In this mission he succeeded.

The scientific community especially in Zimbabwe but also in the region and in other countries around the world will miss Peter Mason's valuable contributions to the development and promotion of local health science researchers.