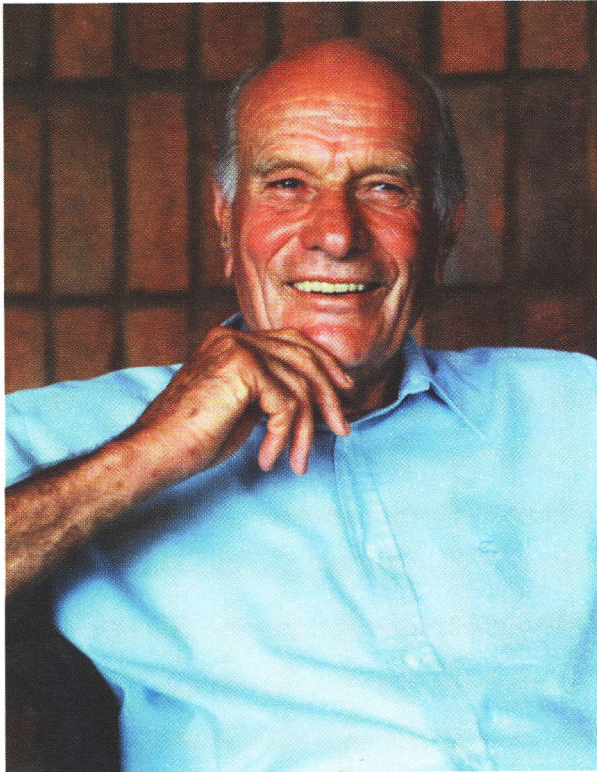




# INTERVIEW

With Doctor Howard Botha



*Chatting with Howard Parkin Botha, I found a friendly man, full of humour and laughter – all his friends and patients tell you the same.*

Twice Howard has been out of family practice; but returned to it. “I was looking for something in which I could work directly with patients.”

Howard once wrote, “An ordinary working doctor with eyes that can see and ears that can hear can become a very knowledgeable person.”

Interviewing him in his consulting room, where he practises from his home, suggested to me quite clearly that Howard has open eyes and ears.

Howard left Namaqualand after matriculating from

Springbok and qualified as a doctor from the University of Pretoria in 1949. After internship he worked as an assistant at Koster and went on to practise at Koffiefontein in the Free State for five years. He tells me a lovely story from those years; “All of us in the Koster practice were connected with the village rugby team. The senior partner was the team coach and we two youngsters were playing for the team. One weekend we had a patient at term, due to deliver any time. We were playing away at Rustenburg and that meant the full compliment of village doctors would be away. So we just took the good lady along and she watched from a car next to the field while we kept an eye on her between movements! She delivered uneventfully when we were all back home again!”

Howard completed his MD at the University of Pretoria. His work was on the pattern of illness in the North Eastern Transvaal and its implications for health promotion. He moved to Pretoria in 1962 and practised there till he joined the Planning Section of the Department of Health and Welfare in 1975. On arrival in Pretoria he immediately got involved with organised general practice. In 1963, Dr John Struthers of the Northern Transvaal Faculty of General Practice of the College of Medicine asked him to take over the Branch. They used to meet on Tuesday evenings and also travelled over to the Johannesburg group for meetings with Boz Fehler and Co. At one stage, he

travelled to Johannesburg every Friday for the Examinations and Credentials Committee and experienced strongly the dominance of specialists

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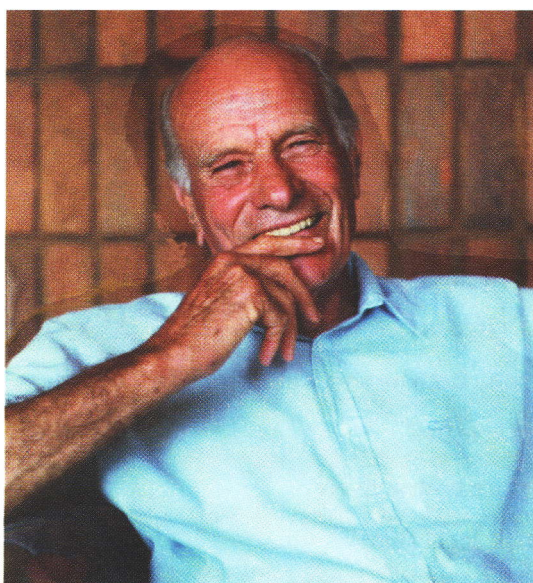
over our discipline. He thus became an enthusiastic participant in the formation of the Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care in 1980. “This was a big push forward for general practice,” he says.

Long before this, however, Howard was pioneering the first department of Family Medicine in South Africa. It started with the two men who had been his promoters for his doctorate. Hennie Snyman (at first the head of Internal Medicine and later Dean) and Dolf Strating (the head of Community Health).

Snyman returned from an overseas tour and was convinced that South Africa was neglecting the general practitioner. He involved Howard and Piet

van Biljon, who later became the editor of the SAMJ. In 1966 Howard visited Professor Scott in Edinburgh who occupied the first chair in general practice created in the world, as well as Professor Jan van Es from Utrecht. With the £300 the HSRC gave him, he also attended the 2nd WONCA meeting in Salzburg where he met Donald Rice, the Director of the Canadian College of Family Physicians.

All these people inspired him and by 1968 he, together with Piet van Biljon and George Davie, began establishing the first Department of Family Medicine in South Africa. In 1968 he became the first head (part time) and professor of Family Medicine in the country. I read between the lines that he would still have been there, if it had not been for the enormous bungling of the TPA with the change-over to a full time position.



The first master's students completed their degrees in 1970. Amongst those who visited and inspired them in the fledgling departments in those days, were Don Rice from Canada, Jan van Es from the Netherlands and Pat Burn from the UK. Although there was no monetary reward for furthering your studies as a general practitioner, Howard

says that GPs were very enthusiastic to do the master's course. There was great camaraderie. People inspired one another. The first College

examination in those early years for instance, attracted 70 candidates.

As things developed he also made contact and worked with the enthusiasts from the Cape: Basil Jaffe, Mossie Silbert, Norman Levy, Austin Spratt, Teddy Hofmeyer and Joe Levenstein. North and South worked together through turbulent times for the discipline to become established across the country.

Howard has written a great deal and received many rewards which I do not want to list here. Both MASA and the Academy have made him an honorary life member. He was also made a Fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners of the UK. He has recently completed two terms as President of the Academy.

However, these things do not describe Howard adequately. He lost his first wife due to a chronic illness and recovered from a major coronary event himself, and through these experiences became even more able to stand alongside his fellow man and patients in their difficulties. He is a family man with three kinds of children: "mine, hers and ours!" There is also one marriage between one of his daughters and Werda's son. Both he and Werda are very proud of and enjoy their five grandchildren greatly. They are both actively participating members of their local Dutch Reformed Church congregation in Queenswood. They live on a Northern rocky slope with an abundance of indigenous vegetation in their very well cared for garden.

It is always a good experience to visit this humble man with the big smile. Howard enjoys life as a gift from God and gets things done for his patients as he has done for the discipline of Family Medicine in its infancy in South Africa.

**Interviewed by Sam Ferhsen**

**Portrait by Eddie Harvey**