

# Rheumatic disease 'ignored' in South Africa

Rheumatic disease had been ignored in South Africa, said Prof OL Meyers, President of the South African Rheumatism and Arthritis Association.

Prof Meyers was making the opening address at a one-day teach-in on "Rheumatology and the GP" organised by Pfizer Laboratories in September.

Prof Meyers added: "The rheumatic diseases are of major importance in South Africa." For too long the diseases had been neglected. However, there had been a renewed awakening of the problem of rheumatic diseases.

He said there was also ignorance in South Africa about the number of rheumatic diseases seen by doctors. Nobody had counted the cost of the diseases to South Africa.

It was a disturbing statistic that about half-a-million South Africans were unable to participate fully in the workforce because they were suffering from arthritis or related diseases.

Concern had been expressed about the serious impact on productivity and the absence to a large degree of facility for the rehabilitation of the arthritic, or the minimisation of the adverse effects of arthritis on the patient, both from a physical and mental point of view.

He added: "It is estimated that in South Africa this year there will be about one-and-a-half million new

prescriptions for one or more form of musculo skeletal diseases. There are probably another quarter-million similarly affected undiagnosed or not seeking treatment. Of this total, some 30 per cent are potential contributors to our total productive manpower."

The problem was immense and had to be tackled urgently. Relieving the problem could be only partly achieved through drug therapy and this approach was being actively pursued.

Significant points made by other speakers included:

- Rheumatoid arthritis had a sinister reputation because of the relatively high incidence of the disease and of the possibility of crippling in the severe form, said Dr WA McDonald Scott, a specialist rheumatologist from Durban.

"What should be done with a patient who presents with clinically obvious, severe, active rheumatoid arthritis?" asked Dr Scott. "These patients are invariably close to the end of their tether, they have lost confidence in themselves and in their medical advisers, and see no light at the end of the tunnel.

"It is essential, therefore, to build up rapport as quickly as possible and to do this by taking a series of steps that will outline the size and shape of the problem and

the various factors involved. It will then be possible to make a comprehensive plan to set things in motion."

- The medical fraternity had ignored the advantages of manipulation in the treatment of backache, said Dr S Brighton, Head of the Department of Rheumatology, University of Pretoria.

He said whether one approved or disapproved of manipulation was no longer of importance. The fact was that it was being used by more and more medical people, paramedicals and others.

- Osteoarthritis is a common consequence of sports injuries according to Dr Clive Noble, a Johannesburg Orthopaedic Surgeon.

He said that sport might provide great pleasure to many millions of people but there was no doubt that sport took its toll and that many sportsmen suffered joint injuries.

It appeared that running would increase the incidence of degeneration in the knee joint.

- The psyche plays a significant part in rheumatic disease, according to Dr McDonald Scott.

He said this recognition should be used as an essential tool in the management of those who were basically frightened human beings.

- Dr R Rathgeber, a general practitioner from Umhlanga Rocks, Natal, said it was essential that the sport medicine practitioner should adopt a positive attitude to the treatment of sporting injuries.

In order to achieve healing as quickly as possible and of as high a quality as possible it was necessary to have a wholistic approach to the injury.

- Dr Anderson, closing the talk-in, said: "We are living in a new era. At the teach-in an attempt has been made to acknowledge an awareness within the medical profession about rheumatic illnesses, and also outwardly to the lay public.

"The negative approach of a few years ago has gone over to one of dynamic optimism."

*Among the speakers at Pfizer's teach-in were (from left to right) Dr R Rathgeber, Prof OL Meyers, Dr AT Scher, Dr I Anderson, Dr S Brighton, Dr PK Pybus, and Dr C Noble. Not in the picture is Dr WA McDonald Scott.*

