

Dr Alexander Robert Pettigrew Walker (13 September 1913 - 21 May 2007)



It is with great sadness that we bring to readers' attention the passing of our friend and colleague, Dr A R P Walker, who died peacefully in his sleep on Tuesday 21 May 2007 in his 94th year. He officially retired from the National Health Laboratory Service, Sandringham, Johannesburg, in February 2006.

We mourn his loss with Betty, his wife, and their family. Dr Walker was an institution on his own, a productive scientist, a prolific writer and a caring human being. We all knew him as a gentle, quiet, modest and deeply religious man with a subtle sense of humour. He was mentor and inspiration for many nutrition scientists in South Africa, Africa, and the world.

For more than 50 years the observations, research and writings of Alexander Walker have motivated and inspired scientists and practitioners to explore and examine the relationships between diet and health/ill-health.

Dr Walker can be regarded as the pioneer who focused world attention on the possible protective effects of the traditional African diet. As early as 1947 he started to point out that eating foods rich in fibre and low in fat, animal protein and cholesterol change bowel motility and are associated with a low occurrence of atherosclerosis, appendicitis, diabetes mellitus, gallstones and certain cancers. From these observations, the dietary fibre hypothesis was later formulated by authors such as Walker, Painter, Burkitt and Trowell. This hypothesis led to a paradigm shift in our thinking about diet and non-communicable diseases. The impact of this paradigm shift can be seen in the global focus on the role of diet in chronic diseases, in dietary recommendations and in the food industry (by producing and promoting low-fat, high-fibre products). This is now part of nutrition history.

Dr Walker received a PhD in 1948 and a DSc in 1965, both from the University of Cape Town. In addition to his approximately 1 000 papers in scientific journals (of which almost half were written after he turned 60), he was the recipient of numerous awards including an MRC gold medal, the Vahouny Fibre Citation Award, and in 1989, an honorary doctorate from the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education.

The memorial service for Dr Walker, held at the Trinity Memorial Church, Linden, Johannesburg, on Friday 8 June 2007 was attended by friends and colleagues of many years. Isadore Segal's description of Dr Walker in his Festschrift (supplement to the *SAMJ*, July 1994) from Jeremiah 17:8 was read at this service: 'And he shall be like a tree planted by waters, toward the stream spreading its roots, and it shall not notice the heat's arrival, and its foliage shall be fresh; in the year of the drought it shall not worry, nor shall it cease from yielding fruit.' This is how we will remember Alexander Robert Pettigrew Walker.

To Betty, his loyal wife, and his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, our sincere condolences and empathy with your bereavement. You will miss him as a husband, a father, a grandfather and a great-grandfather. We will miss him as a colleague, a mentor and a giant among scientists.

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