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Marianne Alberts (1928–2020): Caring, passionate and humble biochemist and pioneer

In this tribute, we celebrate the remarkable life and work of Marianne Alberts (née Andersson) – biochemist by training, pioneer, teacher, researcher, and caring human being – who was born on 6 August 1928 in Ostersund, Sweden, and who developed her academic and research career, spanning almost seven decades, in South Africa. After graduating from the University of Lund (Sweden), she travelled to South Africa in 1954, where she met and married a South African, Dr H.W. Alberts, in 1955. After briefly working at the CSIR, she joined the South African Institute for Medical Research as a biochemist and research assistant until 1974, during which time she obtained her doctorate from the University of Pretoria, graduating in 1963. She first joined the University of the North (now the University of Limpopo) as a lecturer in the Department of Physiology in 1975, and soon became involved in major academic developments. There she was integral to the establishment of the Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences (1979), School of Anatomy (1980) and Department of Nutrition (1984), and played various roles throughout her career at the university. Although Marianne first retired from the university in 1986, she continued to be involved in part-time lecturing, only to be called back to the Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences and remaining in full-time service until 2016. She contributed to the education and careers of generations of young, mostly black, South African scientists, graduating 18 MSc and 10 PhD students and mentoring many more. She published over 60 research papers. In 2019, at the time of her retirement, she received the University of Limpopo's Lifetime Excellence Award and was deeply touched by this honour.

Her legacy project was to establish the Dikgale Health and Demographic Surveillance System (DHDSS) and Research Centre in 1995. The DHDSS was a founder member of the International Network for the Demographic Evaluation of Populations and their Health (INDEPTH) established in 1998. Professor Osman Sankoh, who stepped down as Executive Director of INDEPTH in 2018, said that Marianne never missed an Annual General Meeting or International Scientific Meeting, whether in Africa, Asia or elsewhere. Professor Steve Tollman, Scientific Director of INDEPTH, described her as 'a grande dame of INDEPTH and a testament to what determination can achieve; and that, if anything, age is not a barrier but a blessing'.

Through her work she gave the communities from the villages around the university a voice, and created awareness about the rising levels of non-communicable and infectious diseases and their devastating toll on health and well-being. The DHDSS collected longitudinal population data on vital events, health and socio-economic factors to monitor lifestyle changes, to study prevalent diseases and their causes, with a view to applying these insights to health programmes. In 2018, the target surveyed population was expanded to reach 100 000 individuals, enabled through an ambitious national programme, funded by the Department of Science and Innovation, with the DHDSS becoming a nodal centre of the South African Population Research Infrastructure Network, and being renamed DIMAMO. Marianne was the Emeritus Director of the DIMAMO Population Health Research Centre that was formally inaugurated on 10 December 2018.

The grand opening of DIMAMO was in a marquee tent in the garden on a stifflingly hot day in Limpopo, and it was a great pleasure for me to spend 2 days with Marianne at that time. The opening event was packed with university and governmental partners, funders, collaborators, students and her family, all of whom came to celebrate this great achievement, spearheaded by such a remarkable woman. She energetically stepped up unassisted onto the podium and in her low-key manner explained the genesis and challenges that had led to that moment. The next day Marianne took me on a long drive to the villages of the region and we talked about the people and their complex lives, and the communities and their hardships. It was clear that she knew them well, had spent much time within the villages and truly cared for the people. She showed me the schools, the clinics and the community areas, and on discovering some beautiful flowers on a cluster of succulent plants, we stopped for a while to have a closer look.

Marianne's research and her collaborative work highlighted the rise in non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, which are serious public health problems in the country. She lamented the fact that patients had little knowledge of the risks and that compliance with medication remained low. Referring to DIMAMO, she told audiences that the centre's work would boost South Africa's research into inequality, poverty and population health, including non-communicable diseases, and that the work was expected to inform interventions to significantly improve the health and socio-economic well-being of the whole population. The DIMAMO HDSS will continue to collect data that will document the changing exposure to risk factors to various non-communicable diseases in rural South Africa, hopefully saving lives through better knowledge and targeted interventions.

I started working closely with Marianne in 2012. Our team, spanning four African countries, met for the first time in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the inauguration of the Human Heredity and Health in Africa (H3Africa) Consortium. I discovered Marianne's love for walking and for a glass of red wine with her evening meal – activities we were to pursue on many occasions. Our H3Africa study is referred to as AWI-Gen, the Africa Wits-INDEPTH Partnership for Genomic Research, and Marianne was the principal investigator of one of its six study centres. She was always responsive and involved her team in activities, personally attending many workshops and meetings of H3Africa in different African countries. As recently as October 2019, despite formally retiring on 31 July 2019, she attended the H3Africa meeting in Tunisia and remained a valued member of the team to the end of her life. She passed on 1 August 2020 in Polokwane, South Africa.

Described by her granddaughter as a 'rebellious trailblazer', and by her students, colleagues and friends as extraordinary, humble, knowledgeable, dignified, dependable, wise and compassionate, thoughtful and generous of mind and heart, the world is a better place for Marianne's life, well lived.