

Obituary

Alan John Flisher

16 April 1957 – 18 April 2010

We have lost a friend, a comrade, a superb teacher and academic, a highly accomplished social and medical scientist, a dedicated activist and a teacher, particularly in the sphere of mental health. He was also a devoted family man and leaves his long standing partner Mehrunisa and their nine year old twins, Khaleila and Adam. Alan died in Cape Town of leukaemia at the age of 53 years. He will be sorely missed. At the time of his death he held the Sue Strengmann Chair in Child Psychiatry and Mental Health at the University of Cape Town (UCT). All his formal qualifications – seven in all – were from UCT. He also held an Adjunct Professorship in health promotion at the University of Berger, Norway, and was Director of the Mental Health and Poverty Project at UCT.

Alan began in Psychology at UCT gaining Honours in 1978, then a Masters in Clinical Psychology in 1981, following an earlier BSc degree with a major in Mathematics. During the 1980s he was part of that wave of then young people who became activist against apartheid through the vehicles of OASSSA (Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa), and **PINS (Psychology in society)**. He published a piece in **PINS 7** in 1987¹, and in 1993 he was part of a group who wrote a partial history of OASSSA. This early turn to activism never faded and simply expanded in scope and extent, with a fully international reach over the last decade or so.

Alan switched direction from 1983, returning to study medicine and graduated with a MB ChB in 1988, gaining a Diploma in Child Health in 1991, a MMed in Psychiatry in 1994, and a PhD in 1996 with a thesis titled, **Epidemiology of risk behaviour of high-school students**. It was this area, the question of risk and adolescence that was to form the spinal column of his very productive research work. His working career for the last 20 years was with the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape, Groote Schuur and UCT, separated by fruitful spells abroad on sabbatical exchanges at the Universities of Columbia, Oslo, Harvard, Pennsylvania and Leeds. From 2003 until his untimely death he was Head of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Red Cross Hospital and UCT.

As a researcher, mainly in two broad fields, of mental health policy and youth risk, mainly through epidemiological approaches, Alan Flisher was astonishingly productive. He published some 180 journal articles, 50 or so chapters or sections, 25 reports and

¹ Flisher, A (1987) Some psychological aspects of commencing "National Service" in South Africa. **PINS 7**, 36-53.

many briefer pieces. He presented literally hundreds of conference or scholarly talks. He was just as prolific as a research supervisor having completed 8 PhDs and 15 Masters theses. At the time of his death he was supervising 12 PhDs and 6 Masters theses; an extraordinary record showing his influence as a mental health researcher. He received awards and considerable research grants. He was active on a whole string of editorial boards and advisory boards connected with mental health across the globe. He was an active reviewer for over 50 journals and publication entities. He had a hand in organising ten conferences. As should be immediately apparent, Alan had enormous energy for work and for life. On a positive note, we will hear his voice for some while yet, for he left some 50 or more publications in press or in advanced preparation.

Alan was actively involved in mental health policy development in conjunction with the Department of Health, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations. He worked very hard to increase service provision. He was involved in teams to develop norms and standards for various structures. He campaigned vigorously against the perils of substance abuse. He was everywhere in the battle against AIDS. He advanced quite substantially our understanding of risk among young people. At the time of his death he ran a large study of mental health policy and implementation in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia.

His contribution to social science and mental health was simply enormous. With his infectious grin, his force for life and his open warmth he will be missed in every conceivable possible way. Yet we are grateful and thankful for his short and productive life.

Don Foster and Andy Dawes