The Theiler Memorial Trust Award

Dr Walter Plowright

First recipient of the Theiler Memorial Trust Award

In 1988 the Theiler Memorial Trust was founded by Margaret Theiler in memory of her father, Sir Arnold Theiler, pioneer of veterinary science in South Africa and founder of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute and the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria. The objective of the Trust is to promote veterinary science in southern Africa by means of grants to outstanding candidates independent of race, sex, creed or nationality, for study, research, travel or for any other activity which would further its purpose.

In a policy statement issued earlier this year, the Advisory Board of the Trust committed itself to sharing the considerable expertise in veterinary science, accumulated over many years in South Africa, with its neighbours and other countries in Africa. For this purpose high priority will be given to postgraduate training of scientists from African countries, to the support and encouragement of relevant research and to the application of research results to promote animal health in Africa.

To further emphasize its African commitment, the Board decided in 1993 to create a prestigious "Theiler Memorial Trust Award" in recognition of outstanding scientific achievement in the field of veterinary science applied to the eradication or control of animal diseases in Africa.

And who could be better qualified to become the first recipient of this award than Walter Plowright? He spent the major part of his working life, i.e. 21 years, in Africa, studying various viral diseases ravaging this part of the world. He dedicated his efforts to the development of methods to diagnose and control them. He was committed to solving the disease problems facing livestock owners in Africa, and his achievements in the never-ending war on disease earn him a place among the all-time greats in veterinary virology.

Walter Plowright's most important contribution, the development of a cell culture produced live attenuated vaccine for rinderpest, was the theme of his Theiler Memorial Lecture, delivered at the award ceremony on 30 September 1994. It is interesting to reflect that this dreaded disease, which swept through Africa in the last decade of the previous century and decimated Africa's cattle and wildlife populations, was directly instrumental in the appointment of Arnold Theiler as the first "Government Bacteriologist" and in the founding of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute. Rinderpest was

eventually eradicated from southern Africa with the help of a primitive vaccine, but it remained the single most important viral disease in Central, West and East Africa for almost a century. It was only after Dr Plowright developed his highly effective and safe vaccine in the late fifties that eradication from the rest of Africa became a practical proposition. A number of local campaigns followed in various parts of Africa and today, after a concerted effort supported by various international organizations, we are on the verge of the total eradication of the disease from the continent. Once this is achieved, eradication of the disease from the face of the earth would be a distinct possibility. This would constitute a major scientific breakthrough on par with the total eradication of smallpox some years ago, and Walter Plowright would have played a pivotal role in achieving it.

Rinderpest is only one of many success stories in the career of Dr Plowright, however. He also pioneered the study of malignant catarrhal fever, a disease transmitted to cattle by wildebeest, and first isolated and cultivated the virus causing it. The elucidation of the epidemiology of the disease assisted in the development of precautionary measures.

His early expertise in cell culture techniques enabled Dr Plowright to establish a number of other animal viruses in culture, some for the first time, including those causing Rift Valley fever, Nairobi sheep disease, contagious pustular dermatitis, sheep pox, lumpy-skin disease, Allerton disease, bovine papular stomatitis and African swine fever. The growth, stability and pathogenesis of these viruses were studied and immunological techniques for their detection and vaccines for their control followed for many of them.

Finally, we must acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Dr Plowright as a leader in his field and as a teacher, responsible for the training of a whole generation of virologists, both in Africa and the UK. We honour Dr Plowright, as an esteemed colleague, scholar, scientist and leader, for his signal contribution to the promotion of the well being of man and animal in Africa.

October 1994
Pretoria

EDITOR