

Sir Arnold Theiler
(26/03/1867 - 24/07/1936)



GENERAL

In 1891 a young Swiss veterinarian arrived in Pretoria, his profession completely unknown and any facilities for research or investigation non-existent. All he had was his strength of character, his brain and his two hands, one of which he was soon to lose in an accident. Yet this, coupled with boundless determination, energy and exactness were soon to earn him worldwide respect for his knowledge, professional service and profession. C.F.B.Hofmeyr, 1971, in his Foreword to "Arnold Theiler 1867-1936: his life and times" by Gertrud Theiler. Published by the University of Pretoria.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Sir Arnold Theiler (1867 - 1936) was the father of veterinary science in South Africa. He was an outstanding researcher, administrator and teacher and made an enduring contribution to various disciplines both in South Africa and internationally.

He was born in Frick, Switzerland in 1867. He qualified as a veterinarian in Zurich. In 1891 he packed his bags, few books, microscope and surgical instruments and took the steamer to the Cape, and then by train and post-chaise he travelled to Pretoria.

He first worked as a farm hand at Irene Estates. It was here that he lost his left hand in a chaff cutter. At the end of that year he started practicing as a vet in Pretoria.

In 1893 his reputation was established when he offered to prepare vaccine to combat an outbreak of smallpox among mine workers on the Witwatersrand. His success led to his appointment as state veterinarian in 1896.

On 11th May 1896 he was officially sworn in as State Veterinarian for the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.



At this time rinderpest was devastating the cattle population. In collaboration with others he succeeded in developing a vaccine by means of which the disease was eradicated in 1897.



RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Theiler later proposed the establishment of a research institute under a state veterinarian at which the production of vaccines against pleuropneumonia, black-quarter, rinderpest and smallpox could be carried out. He suggested that the disinfection station and stables at Daspoort, on the outskirts of Pretoria could easily be converted into suitable quarters. Apart from the research into the animal diseases and the production of remedies, he pointed out that the state veterinarian should also act as adviser to the government in all matters pertaining to animal diseases and hygiene and that the laboratory should act as a centre of consultation for the public.

In March 1898 his recommendations were accepted and he was appointed director of the Bacteriological Institute and later "staatsveearts" to the artillery of the ZAR. During the Anglo-Boer War he was the official veterinarian of the Boer forces.

Daspoort



ONDERSTEPSPOORT VETERINARY INSTITUTE

In 1908 the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute was founded and Theiler was the first Director. As a result of his hard work and exceptional leadership many local diseases were researched and vaccines were manufactured.



ANIMAL DISEASES

Theiler is especially known for his work on *Babesia equi* showing that it is caused by a tick called *Rhipicephalus evertsi*. He also proved that East African Coast Fever is caused by *Piroplasma parva* (*Theileria parva*). He also worked on epizootic contagious catarrh of equines and anthrax in the ostrich and contagious abortion in cattle. He discovered the cause of lamsiekte. Large parts of South Africa were opened up for cattle farming as a result of this and other discoveries, contributing significantly to the economic development of his adopted fatherland.

FACULTY OF VETERINARY SCIENCE



The first graduates 1924 with Sir Arnold Theiler

In 1920 The Faculty of Veterinary Science was established enabling veterinarians to be trained locally. Prior to that time South Africans who wished to become vets had to go overseas for their training. Theiler was the first dean of the faculty. He retired in 1927 and died in 1936.

A memorial statue to Theiler was erected in front of the main building at the Institute.



The daughters Gertrud (left) and Margaret in front of the statue.

REFERENCES

Theiler, Gertrud : Arnold Theiler 1867-1936; his life and times. Publikasies van die Universiteit van Pretoria. Nuwe reeks nr.61. 1971.

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