

Speech: Faculty Centenary Celebration 2020

A warm welcome to Prof Kupe, Mosia, Previous Deans, Guests, Staff and Students present here today. It is really good to have everyone here, as it is not every day that we manage to get staff and our students together in one location. So why are we here today.... We are here to celebrate a defining moment in History of the Country and our profession. And it all started about 130 years ago, with three major events: A good book; Lost Luggage and an Unfortunate Farm Accident.... You may think this the start of a bad joke... But I promise that these are the events that led to the start of our Faculty as these three events paved the way for Theiler's opening of the Faculty and in him becoming our First Dean. Let me elaborate:

- As a Teenager Theiler loved a book titled "Travels into the interior Parts of Africa by Way of the Cape of Good Hope in years 1780-1785" which according to his biography made him always want to travel to South Africa. Not surprisingly when he was informed that there was need for a Veterinarian in the "new Transvaal", he jumped at the opportunity and headed to Joberg.
- On his trip here, his luggage and equipment got lost in Cape Town (No real different to modern day International travel to South Africa)... leaving him pretty much destitute. As a result he had to settle for a lower paying job as a farm hand on the Farm Irene in the interim. This led to a major change in his life, when within a few weeks of starting the new job, he lost his hand operating farm equipment which put an end to any future he may have had as a field veterinarian, and as a result put him on a different path.
- This different path came into being when he asked to attend a local meeting on the Small Pox outbreak at the time (1893) in Swaziland. Here the dire situation was discussed as the vaccine was not available and the disease threatened the survival of the young city of Johannesburg. At this point, Theiler made it known that he knew how to make the small pox vaccine, which he learned as a vet student in Switzerland. This gave rise to the Daspoort Laboratory Theiler's first vaccine factory, and in later years when more space was needed gave rise to the Bacteriology Laboratory on the De Farm Onderstepoort, on which we stand today.

So why Onderstepoort. According to Theiler's first report (which later became the first issue of OJVR), the area had a railway station, was on a major route, was next to the Apies River and as an area was rife with Horse Sickness, Babesia, Theileria and numerous poisonous plants. While Theiler's initial work at Onderstepoort was to find innovative treatments and vaccines in the main building (Theiler Building at the ARC OVR), Facilities were already built for student training by 1908. Nonetheless it was many years later and numerous discussions that led to the Vet School being given permission to start. The TUCS of UNISA were chosen as the hosting institution due to its location near Onderstepoort. When initial discussions had started towards the training of a degree in Veterinary Science Studies, the programme was housed in the Faculty of Agriculture of TUCs. In following discussion Theiler agreed to train veterinary students on condition that he was made Dean of the Faculty and Director of the Bacteriology Laboratory. In 1920 he took office and admitted the first 8 veterinary students into the BVSc course, which became the second medial degree offered in South Africa, two years after UCT admitted the first MBCHB student.

So what were the aims of the early Faculty? The following were listed in Theiler First Official Speech:

- 1) To allow for veterinary training to be adapted to the needs of the stock raising community and to manage important diseases unique to South Africa.

- 2) To ensure that South Africans had the opportunity to study to be veterinarians without having to travel outside of the country.
- 3) To ensure that a knowledge of South African conditions, both social and economic, would underpin training.
- 4) To allow scientific research in the field to develop more freely as this would be linked to a SA Vet College that was equipped with adequate facilities to support education and research.
- 5) To ensure that the school would investigate diseases peculiar to the country and thereby contributed to the scientific solutions against tropical disease in general.
- 6) To train of vets who could fit into any country be it in Africa, Egypt, India and the West Indies.

Theiler went on to end his speech with an interest statement which I paraphrase "I wish to utter a grave word of warning to those who consider the study of Veterinary Science to be a lucrative investment. I appeal to the young South African as the future veterinarian who above everything else must have the welfare of the country at heart. While our Science does not lend itself to the accumulation of wealth, it offers all prospects for distinction not only for our own country but in the scientific world at large."

And this is where we stand today, a 100 years later having just admitted our 101'st BVSc class. So what have we achieved and what would Prof Theiler be proud of:

- 1) The Faculty has a syllabus that is geared towards the support of the South African animal health industry, which through guidance provided by the Veterinary Council is directed towards applicable day one skills, together with a syllabus geared more towards production animal medicine.
- 2) The Faculty has afforded numerous South Africans the opportunity to enter into the veterinarian profession. The old UP, MEDUNSA Faculties (pre-1999) and new national Faculty in total have trained 5040 veterinarians 1170 nurses.
- 3) Our training has advanced from training the undergraduate members of our profession, to the possibility of graduates training towards 22 different specialities. Through the hard work of our pioneering staff and early qualified specialists they have ensured the progression of veterinary medicine in the country to such an extent that where previously, conditions such as equine colic would be fatal, they can now be easily managed in modern surgical theaters
- 4) The country is now a leader in the management of animal disease and vaccine development, as evident from the numerous research projects being undertaken by our Masters and Doctoral candidates; as well as the numerous vaccine development projects being managed by staff members.
- 5) Our Veterinarians are trained for the global market, and while as far as I'm aware we've don't have anyone practicing in Egypt, our graduates are very mobile and at times are able to automatically practice in many countries.
- 6) And lastly and something I am very proud of, we are currently ranked as a Top 50 veterinary school in the two only veterinary ranking.

All in all, I think that Prof Theiler would very proud of what the Faculty has become, especially how closely the Faculty has followed his founding ideals. Without doubt Theiler has left a lasting Legacy for a veterinary programme strongly based on an ethos of research; a world class veterinary campus that competes with the best in the world; to even the Logo use by our Faculty House, the OPVSC. Not many would know that Logo and the words *Experto Credo* (Trust in the experienced) was penned by Theiler. The logo was designed to represent South African Veterinary Education with the Book being the symbol for education, and the veterinarian represented by an antique pleximeter (patellar hammer) and the vaccine screw needed to open the older vaccine bottles.

But where to next.... How does the Faculty see the next 100 years:

- We will continue to support and develop the local farming industry. Through organized agriculture, we can become a driving force behind the South African economy. Through better food production we will not only have a healthier nation, but can help build foreign reserves through trade with international partners.
- As we move into the fourth industrial revolution, the Faculty is ready to move forward and embrace technology and find innovative ways to incorporate technology in how we practice. Instead of being afraid of being replaced by Dr Google, we need to advance the profession so that Dr Google consults us.
- The Faculty has over the years spearheaded the advancement of specialist care of animals in the country. As we move forward, we have plans to advance the academic hospital, so that we move from tertiary to quaternary care.
- We would like to ensure that all our profession is supported by cutting edge developments in science be it through epidemiological studies, new vaccine development or big data science.
- And lastly to be a school where our undergraduate students get the best possible clinical training, that allow for outstanding patient care be it at a local community clinic or a tertiary care facility

With that I will end, and congratulate the Faculty on an outstanding achievement. To our staff and students here today, I look forward to entering into the next century of veterinary education with you. Never before has our Future looked so bright.