

## JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RICKY WILSON AWARD 2016

### A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE VETERINARY CONTRIBUTIONS OF DR. ALAN FISHER

After graduating at Onderstepoort in 1975, Alan completed his military obligations and then joined the State Veterinary Service in the Eastern Cape, first at Middelburg and subsequently at de Aar. He soon caught the attention of Dr Peter Harte, the private practitioner at Queenstown, and was offered a position which he accepted. Under the tutelage of Peter and of Cliff Dent (State Veterinarian) he quickly blossomed into an excellent practitioner and became a partner. His main interest was always ruminant farming in all its aspects. When Peter left the practice Alan became the senior partner and was able to shed some of the companion animal obligations onto junior partners to concentrate on livestock farming services. In this he excelled and became a byword for a practical, scientific, and ethical service that was based on sustained improvement of production and profits. He was thus one of the earliest groups of veterinarians who promoted holistic livestock health and production. As his knowledge and skills expanded the demand for his services grew so much that he decided it would be better if he left the by now multivet practice to render an exclusively consultancy – based service, with minimal clinical involvement. In this he was again very successful and in high demand in the area. He concentrated on improving production and reproduction of beef cattle and wool sheep in particular. Tested bulls and rams; records of herds, cows and ewes; appropriate feeding for all stages; pregnancy diagnosis and decisions based on this information; effective records – based selections and cullings – all these are commonplace today but it took early developers and implementers like Alan to make them so. He was able to show hard-nosed and critical farmers that it pays to invest in their livestock, and their veterinarians.

Alan somehow also found time for a series of research support activities and investigations exemplified by investigating a link between soil types and cerebrocortical necrosis, and his support for research into targeted selective treatment for haemonchosis, that culminated in the development of the now famous FAMACHA system. There are many reports, presentations and articles that attest to his contributions to scientific knowledge. All the hard work over decades took its toll on his health. Scanning hundreds of thousands, possibly eventually millions of ewes in dusty sheds left his lungs scarred and deficient, rectal pregnancy diagnosis and other physical work in cattle damaged his arm joints. As a result he was given medical advice to retire from private consultation work, which he reluctantly did and took up a post in the Eastern Cape State Veterinary Service.

In this capacity he once again gave an outstanding example of providing a service to the farming community, both communal and commercial. He also played a supportive role in the activities of the regional veterinary laboratory. Here he again played a key role in the PARASOL project funded by the EU, which investigated the extension of TST beyond haemonchosis and led to the development of the FIVE POINT CHECK, a farm system to evaluate the need for treatment in sheep affected by any of the major internal parasites. Currently he is working with Dr Gretha Snyman of Grootfontein to show how selection and culling of sheep for resistance and resilience against *H. contortus* can transform farming. He works closely with Mr Robbie Blaine who farms stud Dohnes near Stutterheim and who has

gone from hopeless reliance on drugs to a foremost advocate of selection and culling, and who now sells sheep very suited to the environment.

His contributions to the veterinary aspects of the livestock industry have been recognised by veterinarians in frequent invitations to address meetings and congresses or workshops; by requests to assist and advise industry organisation like RPO and NWGA; by the high regard in which he is held in the Eastern Cape; and by the agricultural writers of the Province who named him “Agriculturalist of the year” some time ago. It is time that his own group, RuVASA, also recognises his significant contributions and excellent example over 40 years.

Gareth Bath