

Abram van Heerden: 7 September 1927 – 3 September 2021



Abram van Heerden died peacefully in his sleep on 3 September after a long and fruitful life - four days short of his 94th birthday. He grew up on the farm Klipfontein near Wolmaransstad in the then Western Transvaal. After qualifying at Onderstepoort, he joined the state veterinary services and was stationed at Vryburg, Johannesburg and Piet Retief respectfully, before promoted to Assistant Director of Veterinary Services responsible for notifiable animal disease control. Shortly before his retirement in 1985, he was promoted to Director Animal Health when the then Directorate of Veterinary Services was divided into two Directorates – Animal Health and Veterinary Public Health. While still a young state veterinarian, he married the love of his life, Philene.

Through the years they were blessed with two sons and two daughters. The eldest son Schalk, was sadly lost in a tragic motorcycle accident.

Abram left behind many monuments in the South African Veterinary Services. He can rightfully be honoured as the father of veterinary epidemiology in South Africa, having kept meticulous records of all outbreaks of sheep scab, bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis and rabies. Using this data, he time and again astonished everyone for being able to analyse in detail these records and to use it for planning for forthcoming years on disease control strategies, budget needs and human resource needs for the entire country. Many of the policies initiated by him, are still applied today for the control of animal diseases and have changed very little if any, from the policies developed and documented by Abram Van Heerden. He was the father of both the Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis Eradication Schemes and developed in detail testing procedures, disease control and compensation procedures for both diseases. He always had a strong empathy for private veterinarians and opened the door for them for a substantial additional source of income with the launching of both eradication schemes allowing private veterinarians to conduct tests on behalf of the State.

He was the longest living member of the South African Olympics team that competed in London in 1948. He represented South Africa in both the 100m and 200m events. It is thus no wonder that he is still remembered as probably one of the fastest wings who ever played for the Onderstepoort First XV.

He later became a much-respected rugby referee for Northern Transvaal.

Abram van Heerden has been a mentor for not only many young state veterinarians, but also stock inspectors and animal health technicians.

He had a natural feeling for animal disease control and guided many of us in his soft-spoken and calm manner, to take rational and practical decisions on disease control issues that were not necessarily prescribed in textbooks.

We honour him and will always remember him for the monumental work he did to establish sound and rational animal disease control measures in South Africa.

Our heart goes out to Philene, Resta, Hendrik, Adisca, Linda and André and all the grandchildren. We join them in thanking the Lord for the life of Abram Van Heerden.

Gideon Brückner