Editorial

‘Zef’

In the February 2004 edition of the Journal of Tropical Pediatrics Professor Ebrahim looked back over fifty years of the journal. For much of that time he has been intimately involved in the growth and development of the journal and as we enter the fifty first year we wanted to acknowledge and celebrate Zef’s enormous contribution to the health of children across the globe and to this journal. Zef may not approve of an editorial being used in this way but we do hope he will forgive us just this once. We asked Professor David Morley, Zef’s colleague from the Institute of Child Health in London, to summarise Zef’s work. His article testifies to an unwavering commitment to health for all.

Dr Tony Waterston and Dr Doug Simkiss, Editors, Journal of Tropical Pediatrics

Professor Ebrahim or ‘Zef’ as he is affectionately known by thousands of health workers around the globe has played a pivotal role in improving Maternal and Child Health in the less privileged countries of the world.

His initial medical training was in Poona, India followed by a distinguished post-graduate training in the United Kingdom. In the mid ‘60s he returned to serve in Tanzania, his country of birth. Here he was involved with the influential Nutrition Commission and became head of the new Department of Paediatrics at the Dar-es-Salaam Medical School. Perhaps his major contribution to health in the early days of independence in Tanzania was as Chairman of the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Committee of the Ministry of Health.

In 1970 he joined the Institute of Child Health (ICH) in London as a Senior Lecturer and by his retirement in 1992 had been made a Professor. Throughout this period he also held a Consultant Paediatrician post at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. At the Institute he was responsible for the UNICEF/WHO sponsored course for Senior Teachers of Child Health. In 1978 this was to become the first course world wide to offer doctors and later other senior health workers a Master of Science degree at the University of London. This MSc degree in MCH was specifically developed for those from or working in less privileged countries.

The UNICEF/WHO course had contained a 3 month period of study in India, during which visits were made to major training centres in New Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and others, all of which included village programmes. Later, this experience was to encourage Zef to involve MSc students in conducting studies in their own or adjacent countries. Guiding students with the planning, execution and writing up of these studies was an important element of Zef’s work at the ICH. Thanks to his enthusiasm, unfailing patience and dedication a succession of students, many for the first time, gained experience of developing, executing, analysing findings and writing up a small research project to present as their dissertation. They were encouraged to examine the more sociological problems of maternal and child health care. Findings from these research studies often pointed the way forward for preventive aspects of care.

Zef joined Professor Dick Jelliffe as Editor of the Journal of Tropical Child Health. After Dick’s early death, Zef took full responsibility in making it a leading, peer reviewed journal with a major proportion of the papers written by those to whom English was a second language. Over the last 25 years Zef has been a prolific writer of books and has been sole or joint author of 18 publications. Realising that his target audience in underprivileged communities can rarely afford expensive books, he set up a family charity to bring down their cost and thereby achieve a much wider distribution. Zef has lectured or examined at the majority of Universities in the UK and in Europe, running courses related to developing countries. In his writing and teaching he presents material in a manner which captures and inspires. His gift for exploring complicated topics in a clear, detailed and meaningful way has helped many health workers further their understanding.

After retiring from the Institute of Child Health he has been able to spend more time achieving his long-felt need to set up and participate in training courses overseas. His consultancies in a number of countries have led to lasting change, as the following examples illustrate:

In China during 1988, working with WHO using a new Chinese translation of a WHO manual on oral rehydration, he trained middle level health workers from one and later two provinces. This was so successful that he was called on by UNICEF through 7 universities to assist in a major shift in Chinese policy from the Russian model, in which MCH was separated into preventive and curative activities, to a more unified approach. These activities appear to have achieved a marked lowering of maternal and child mortality and encouraged the establishment of a new National and International Training centre in Yan-Tai.

In India then, collaboration with the ICMR on the development of a successful oral rehydration therapy was carried through to the national level in 1984. Following this he continued to work with WHO, UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on maternal and child health care in those countries. His gift for exploring complicated topics in a clear, detailed and meaningful way has helped many health workers further their understanding.

In Africa, though his travels took him to many countries, his work was characterized by an intimate understanding of the health problems of the region and an ability to develop specific strategies and techniques to address these in a practical manner. His gift for exploring complicated topics in a clear, detailed and meaningful way has helped many health workers further their understanding.
Thanks to a number of outstanding students who studied at the ICH, Zef has been able to develop strong links in Recife, one of Brazil’s poorest areas. He was involved in the establishment there of a post-graduate course in MCH. This led to similar degrees in Clinical Paediatrics and Urban Health being set up in other universities in North East Brazil, where postgraduate education can now lead to a PhD.

In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1992 the Ministry of Defence recruited Zef to train senior workers in research at the Armed Forces Hospital. At this leading hospital a total of 35 consultants were trained in four courses. Special emphasis was placed on computer technology and statistics.

Following the war in Vietnam, hospital services were outmoded and rundown, with an almost total absence of textbooks. Zef was involved in annual seminars in Hanoi and Saigon. His lectures were translated into Vietnamese and he encouraged the writing of 5 Vietnamese textbooks. Those he trained used this material to take the training to provincial and district level.

For Zef, research probably took second place to the emphasis he placed on teaching and writing. The 60 original papers he published cover many aspects of Child Health as do the 90 editorials he has produced for the Journal of Tropical Child Health. Zef has a strong belief in the need for statistics and has considerable ability in patiently teaching this subject. This was reinforced by early experience in his professional life in Tanzania where he encountered difficulty in effective planning in the absence of sound statistical information. He was in the forefront of introducing computer technology to overseas students in the ICH and has emphasised the need for an understanding of a statistical approach in the many consultancies he has undertaken.

Zef’s contribution in his lifetime has been enormous but not always well recognised. His life’s work and interest in health care is shared by his family. His wife, Sunni, was in general practice and both his daughters have well established medical careers.

PROFESSOR DAVID MORLEY