

They call him the father of modern epidemiology, with his roots firmly in KZN. **Liz Clarke** reports

Doctor who made the world sit up and listen



Mervyn Susser and his wife, Zena.

THE death of an elderly doctor in New York earlier this month would in all possibility have gone unnoticed, unheralded, by the inhabitants of an isolated rural settlement in Northern Zululand.

Yet ask 74-year-old grandmother, Precious Majolo, or any other senior citizen from the area known as Hlabisa, what changes have taken place in this far-flung village of 90 000 residents, and she will lift her hands to the sky above.

"So many things have happened here. Before we were like the rubbish you throw away. Too many people sick and dying. Today we know a lot. We have learnt about HIV and how we can stop getting the sickness. It's a better life, much better. We can teach our children what we never knew."

Wind

If one could unravel the strings back to when the wind of change blew across this barren landscape, you would find at the driving wheel Mervyn Susser, the former South African doctor whose passing in the US last month, aged 93, was mourned by academics and health professionals around the globe.

A maverick, in an age when independent thinking was often frowned upon, Susser and his wife, Zena, fought to get better health outcomes for poor people in South Africa during the 50s and 60s. It was a com-

mitment that exposed them to the prickly side of the apartheid government.

Once, describing the work he did with Zena, he quipped: "if you might a good collabora-

tor, you'd best marry one. We argue and often fiercely disagree about things, but that's how things are achieved."

What they didn't disagree about was that epidemiology

had to be more than a numbers game, a practical science that got to the root cause of chronic illness, and sought ways to address it at grass-root basis.

Today they are regarded as



The Hlabisa village in northern Zululand.

MERVYN SUSSER: CAREER IN BRIEF

MERVYN Wilfred Susser was born on September 26, 1921, in Johannesburg. A 1950 graduate in medicine from the University of Witwatersrand, he spent several years in community clinical work in the Alexandra Health Centre.

At a time when the majority of the country's population was virtually ignored in medical curricula, a task team

headed by Susser struck out with a small group of colleagues to direct a "township" clinic, in Alexandra, Johannesburg.

Although they began with no knowledge of epidemiology, the effort naturally led them to carry out one of the first studies of community health in the developing world, published in the *Lancet* in 1955 as *Medical Care in an African*

Township.

In 1957, Susser was appointed lecturer in social and preventive medicine at the University of Manchester, and, in 1964, reader and head.

In 1966, he was appointed chair of the division of epidemiology at Columbia University, where he founded the PhD programme in epidemiology.

the founders of a new order of epidemiology.

"Researchers should not be foot soldiers following the dictates of a bureaucratic centre," Susser believed. "I see that as a danger to individual scientific enterprise. Epidemiology is ultimately a science that provides the basis for public health action, no less the case in the era of molecular and genetic epidemiology."

For the couple, 1990 was a watershed year. Eventually hounded from South Africa for

their "progressive" ideas of public health, they continued their careers in public health in the US where they found themselves at the coalface of the explosive beginning of the Aids epidemic.

Undaunted by political threats, they were instrumental in organising a conference in Maputo, Mozambique, that brought together public health experts from inside South Africa, from the exile community and from the US to focus on the possible impact of HIV

on South Africa.

In later years, KZN became the springboard for them to take their ideology to the next level, a leap of faith if ever there was one.

It is a level that grandmothers like Majolo know well. She, like many others, has participated in the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies research programmes for many years.

"First, when the researchers knocked on our doors, we were fearful," she re-

calls. "Disease is a bad thing. It makes you very frightened. But then we saw that they were trying to help us. Nobody else had done this. It was very new for us. Now we like to help."

For her the autumn red panels of the Africa Centre, silhouetted against the azure blue African sky, are synonymous with knowledge and understanding, a welcome beacon in one of the planet's most disease-laden regions.

And that is exactly what the Susser had envisioned – a "door-to-door" approach of gathering information and setting up advisory networks to help families cope with what they termed "unimaginable misery".

They believed this was the long-term solution to getting the answers the medical and health professional world so desperately needed.

And they were right.

Scientists like Salim (Slim) Abdool Karim, director of the Centre of Aids Prevention and Research in South Africa (Caprisa), says that Susser's dogged determination to help disadvantaged communities to overcome disease and social ills through practical science, has been one of the greatest contributions made to public health.

"He is the father of modern epidemiology," says Karim. "His wisdom and foresight, together with his wife, Zena's, will never be forgotten – certainly in this province."

Thanks to the Susser, the world has sat up and listened to many of the findings coming from this remote part of Africa. One major project at Hlabisa showed that exclusive breast-feeding can be done, for both infected and uninfected babies. This study has been very influential in terms of international guidelines.

At the moment, the Africa Centre has more than 6 500 people on treatment and 15 000 to 20 000 people who are not yet eligible for treatment who are being monitored – testament that rigorous science and social justice are the hallmarks of success.

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Doubts remain over Mozambique peace deal

MAPUTO: A peace deal signed by the Mozambican government and the armed political party, Renamo, is allowing people who had fled fighting, to return home. The coming elections could determine whether the peace would be permanent.

People carrying goods on their heads or shoulders can be seen trekking along the main south-north highway, on which Renamo carried out ambushes.

Some convoys of vehicles are still escorted by security forces.

"Just a few days have gone by and we don't know how effective the peace deal is," says Angelica Maquisso, a university student in Maputo.

Analysts say the key could lie in the October 15 elections, campaigning for which began yesterday.

Renamo is deemed to have virtually no chance of beating

Frelimo, the former independence movement that has ruled Mozambique since independence from Portugal in 1975.

But if it gets a substantial share of seats in parliament, that will empower it to pressure the government to interpret the peace deal to its advantage, says Dimpho Motsamai, a Mozambique analyst at South Africa's Institute for Security Studies.

If Renamo – which currently has 51 seats in the 250-member parliament – does badly in the elections, that could prompt it to relaunch the military conflict that has plagued the African country for two years, Motsamai said.

If any party alleges fraud, that might open a space for Renamo to respond violently, Mozambique analyst Fernando Lima concurred.

Supported by white minor-

ity regimes in the then Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) and South Africa, Renamo waged a 16-year civil war against Frelimo, whose initially Marxist regime was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba.

A 1992 peace deal, which turned Renamo into the country's main opposition party, put Mozambique on the path of recovery. But in 2012, Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama launched a low-level insurgency, accusing Frelimo of excluding the opposition from power structures and from participation in the economy.

The insurgency has included attacks against police stations, military barracks, railway lines and above all, ambushes on the north-south highway. The exact number of fatalities is not known.

Renamo's guerrilla warfare has not prevented it from exer-

cising its role in parliament. Renamo has long accused the government of corruption and economic mismanagement.

The peace deal foresees an amnesty for Renamo members charged with crimes, its disarmament, the reintegration of its fighters into the army and police force, and a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Yet details of how the peace deal will be applied are still in the dark.

Some of Renamo's demands, such as joint command of the army, are clearly impossible for the government, says Aditi Lalbahadur, a researcher with the South African Institute of International Affairs.

The signing of the peace deal did not persuade Dhlakama to leave his hideout in the Gorongosa mountains.

"The declaration of a cessation of hostilities is a very

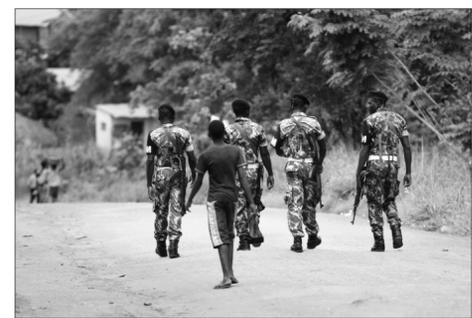


A forthcoming election in Mozambique could determine whether the peace would be permanent.

strong signal, but it would have added value if it were signed by the top leadership from both sides," that is, President Armando Guebuza and Dhlakama, says Mozambican political analyst Calton

Cadeato.

The elections will pit Dhlakama against former defence minister Felipe Nyusi. Guebuza may no longer run for president after completing two terms. A definitive end to the



Even though a peace deal has been signed in Mozambique, security forces still patrol some villages.

violence would help to ensure the growth rate of more than 8 percent that the World Bank and the African Development Bank forecast for one of Africa's most dynamic economies in 2014-15.

The country has become a magnet for the former colonial

power Portugal, which is grappling with an economic crisis.

The big challenge, says Lalbahadur, is preventing those in power from pocketing a disproportionate share of the wealth, which so far has failed to trickle down to the poor majority. – Sapa-DPA

Exception taken to Transnet bonuses and expensive post office executives

Politics

● Yonela Diko – "Leave it to Parliament." Can anyone blame Madonsela for "having no confidence in Parliament" and therefore "showing disrespect", when our judicial system, as well as Parliament, have repeatedly failed to bring, especially, top-brass ministers and high-profile persons connected to the ruling party to book? E.s.e.

● Message to Gwede Mantashe and other Zuma supporters: right is right and wrong is wrong. I'm surprised you don't know the difference. BRM.

● To BackChatter Lelo: you are right – the Speaker of the house should be impartial, but how can she be when she's an ANC appointment and she's there to protect her cronies? How often have we seen her step in when an ANC member is being out-jabbed by the opposition? LG Naidoo, Durban.

● Are Jessie Duarte and Gwede Mantashe twins? Not only do they look alike, but both are very abrasive people.

● If Parliament is allowed to

fall into arrears for millions of rands towards lights and water bills, and are given grace to settle their accounts, is there a reason why I, as a pensioner, am asked to pay an additional deposit of R643 for falling into arrears? The house belongs to my son, who works and lives in Cape Town. Is this deposit legal? Any comments from the heads of department? Anthony M.

● The ANC have actively undermined the constitution, the Section 9 institutions, Parliament, the cabinet, the judiciary as well as the criminal justice system, all levels of governance and international and public trust. SA cannot afford Zuma, his network of cronies, nor the ANC as a collective, who spend most of their time trying to defend the indefensible. All this at the expense of state resources. RB.

Public Protector

● I am filled with the utmost dread for the time when advocate Thuli Madonsela's contract comes to an end. Who will then shield us from and inform us about the rotten, corrupt actions of the

government? She is a shining example of hope, dignified and the epitome of a lady. One can't help comparing her with the querulous, whining Baleka Mbete and Jessie Duarte, who both have dodgy history in their backgrounds, but who are unbelievably in the highest echelons of the ANC government. Says it all, unfortunately.

● Thuli Madonsela for president! Someone with dignity and honour, someone we can be proud of. Vote Thuli Madonsela for President, PM, Durban North.

● The difference between Thuli Madonsela and the ANC big wigs is she understands democracy – they don't.

Middle East

● As a non-Muslim, I support the caliphate. Muslims can move there and live under shariah and we in the West can be safe from attacks.

● Yusuf: you should go back to school and educate yourself rather than making comments about issues of which you know nothing. Tragic deaths of children

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READERS' VIEWS

● The Editor reserves the right to edit or omit SMSes

during the conflict between Israel and Hamas are never celebrated because they are unintended. Same goes for America. However, this cannot be said for the likes of Hamas, Hezbollah and IS, who search for civilian targets and it is their intention to kill as many people as possible. When has any American or Israeli soldier executed a civilian, Yusuf? NCS.

● Calling all BackChatters, join us and 50 000 others as we protest against the execution of 250 Syrian soldiers by IS. Oh, wait, it wasn't Israel who executed them. Protest cancelled.

Sport

● Ken Denysschen: I watched

him play for Durban City. To me the best full-back this country produced. He was the king of the sliding tackle. From Hoy Park, Old Kingsmead to New Kingsmead, he was an idol of the City supporters like myself. Condolences to his family. May he rest in peace.

● Go well, Ken Denysschen. Although those days, on reflection, were seriously tinged with ugly apartheid, I will personally remember you and other City players not as whites, but people who became part of my indelible childhood memories. e.s.essa.

● So sorry to read of the passing of Kenny Denysschen.

What a fine gentleman and still the best slide tackler in the business. Today's prima donnas could learn a lesson or two from him. Sympathies to his wife and family.

● Now that Man United is failing to pick up wins, and results are not forthcoming, Nev7 seems to be in hibernation. AK 7777

● How many of the first-team rugby players attended Glenwood when they were in Grade 10? I don't think the results would be an issue if it came down to coaching methods, but it appears the problem other schools have is its "recruiting".

Teachers/education

● The person who responded to my BackChat regarding teachers. Sir, my main point was many teachers complain about marking of test papers and preparing lessons for their pupils. These are part and parcel of your duty. You shouldn't be complaining about this. You very well knew what profession you had chosen and what is required from you. Prem.

● Prem is forever missing the

point. First, the teachers, now the doctors, what next? We all know the problems facing us. What we want are solutions. So, Prem, don't sound like a stuck CD – help us find solutions.

Odds and ends

● City's equity plan. Speaking of demographics, which demographic pays the highest rates and the bulk of rates to the city? Just asking.

● The Racegoer dated August 27 states "VAAL sand track THURSDAY". I based my bets on horses with "sand form". Guess what, they raced on dried out grass track and I lost all my bets. I usually lose anyway, just so you know. Cheers. Punter JP.

● Petrol price to drop by 70 cents? No, no, no – reduce by 50c only and get rid of all road tolls.

● Well done, Ntokozo Qwabe. Go on, young man, you have got what it takes to succeed. Make a name for yourself. Your success, despite coming from a rural area, speaks a lot about your determination to succeed. PS.

● The Post Office has been operating at a loss, thus denying its employees a reasonable increase and benefits for the past few years. The question is: why is there a need for expensive executives in the PO? They have a chief executive, a chief operating officer, a chief information officer, a chief financial officer, not to mention board executives and endless unqualified GMs.

● Yet another shooting at police this morning off Nandi Drive. Criminals using AK-47s and high performance vehicles, while flying squad battle to put vehicles on the road because of repairs and other internal politics. Where are our police helicopters? People need to stand up against this poor management.

● Who is Sigonyela to say Transnet over the pensioners not a cent? My late husband worked 31 years for Transnet and we only get a 2% increase every year, and that is in black and white. They must stop paying bonuses to all the big shots. So, Transnet, get a skrik and wake up. Els.