

Percy Walter Bryce Pease

2 September 1937 – 13 February 2012

It is with sadness we note the death of Percy Pease. Percy (as he was universally known) was an institution in Paediatric Surgery in New Zealand and the South Pacific. He was the first full-time Paediatric Surgeon in New Zealand and established Paediatric Surgery as a specialty here.



Percy was a “coloured” South African, born in Alice, a small town in rural South Africa. Through perseverance and determination, and in the face of poverty and many hardships, he went to Medical School. Despite the difficulties he encountered from entrenched apartheid, he graduated. The casual insults and denigration he experienced as a young man instilled in him the determination to treat and console the disadvantaged.

He worked initially in Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg (Soweto), where he was exposed to, and thrived on, a wide and demanding clinical load. That experience influenced his approach to clinical problems both in New Zealand and the South Pacific. Percy trained as a Paediatrician but his qualifications were not recognised in South Africa.

Percy became involved in the African National Congress (ANC) and knew such luminaries as Bishop Desmond Tutu. The ANC protected him as best they could, but Percy was arrested for his political activities and then released. Percy realised that he was in imminent danger of re-arrest, and he crossed the border from South Africa to Swaziland, leaving all his possessions behind.

Percy worked in the Hlatikulu Hospital in Swaziland from 1968 to 1970 where he developed an interest in Surgery. He was responsible for the clinical work in the hospital but, as they only had a single handyman, Percy was also responsible for the maintenance of all the plant and equipment. It was a skill he had developed as a child, and which was to remain with him all his life. He maintained many cars that had long since passed their use-by date, and used his skills to maintain his house and garden.

Percy married his wife Sandra in Swaziland. They established and maintained a very close and loving relationship all their married life. Sandra died just 9 weeks before him after a long battle with illness.

Percy next moved from Swaziland to England and gained his qualifications in Surgery before working at the Birmingham Children's Hospital. It was while he was there that he found the opportunity to come to New Zealand.

When Percy arrived in Auckland he recognised that children with complex needs were looked after by adult specialists. He did not recognise such boundaries and set about ensuring that all children were looked after by paediatric specialists. He was determined to provide a proper paediatric patient-centred service. His reputation as a clinician and a surgeon grew and he began to attract children from throughout New Zealand and then from the South Pacific.

Percy had a gregarious personality and a philosophy that encouraged cooperation and respect in the treatment of patients, and so was able to maintain strong relationships with clinicians from around New Zealand and with the parents of patients as well.

The original children's hospital was called Princess Mary and it occupied the site of the current Ronald McDonald House. It had been built as a hospital for American servicemen wounded in Pacific operations during World War 2. It had an expected life of only 5–10 years but lasted 50. Percy was one of the original team of Paediatricians who, together with Paul White, were determined that children deserved better than that. They campaigned in the face of considerable opposition for a proper children's hospital. Resistance to their plans from many quarters thwarted the original vision, but Starship Children's Hospital was the result of their endeavours.

Percy was a founding member of Variety, the children's charity, in New Zealand, and remained involved for the rest of his life. Percy was their medical advisor, and was instrumental in establishing and funding the mobile ear clinic programme together with numerous other activities. He received Variety's highest international honour.

Percy took part in the annual Variety Club fundraising event (the 'Bash') for many years. The Bash always travels through back roads and small towns. It was like a royal tour with Percy. He would know at least one person in every town, he could also remember the names and conditions of children he had operated on, and he could remember their families.

Patients from the South Pacific started to be referred Princess Mary and Starship Hospitals. Percy made an initial trip funded by Auckland Rotary with some Paediatricians. He realised that many of the conditions he was being referred could be looked after in the first instance, in the islands if the local surgeons could be supported and up-skilled.

He made trips to Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, sometimes as part of NZAid, but also at his own expense. He always used the resources available to the locals. He taught and encouraged them and established robust relationships with them so difficult clinical problems could be properly looked after with best interests of the patients and their families at heart.

Percy also encouraged local surgical trainees to consider paediatric surgery, and is responsible for many locals entering that specialty, some with international recognition.

Percy was a loving husband, father and grandfather, a loyal friend and a man with a vision of a better world for its children.

Percy was passionate about the care and welfare of children. He was determined to play his part in providing that care, and we are the better for it.

Our condolences go out to his children and grandson. Correspondence can be sent to peasefamily2012@gmail.com

Chris Chambers, a long-time friend of the family and colleague, wrote this obituary.