

HONORARY GRADUATE

Mervyn Wilfred Susser

Mervyn Susser is one of the University of the Witwatersrand's most distinguished medical graduates whose reputation in the fields of epidemiology and medical sociology is international. It is fitting that his Alma Mater should honour him for his scholarship, dedication to his discipline and continuing concern for the health of the people of his native land.

Born in Johannesburg in 1921, Susser entered our university in 1939 to pursue a degree in the humanities, but the Second World War began later that year, and he volunteered for military service. He spent the next five years in the infantry, later the artillery and then the airforce before he was demobilized in 1945. Before World War II Susser had, in his own words, 'viewed medicine mainly as a bourgeois suburban activity for upwardly mobile people'; it provided no attraction for him as a possible career. By the time the war ended, however, he felt differently. The optimism and even euphoria about social reform in the world at large profoundly affected Susser, who came to see that medicine might, in fact, be a social service to people and to communities. When he returned to Wits in 1945 it was not to the Faculty of Arts but to the Faculty of Medicine that he came.

After qualifying MB BCh in 1950, he did his internship at Coronation Hospital and in 1951, with a deep commitment to community help, he joined the staff of the Health Centre and University Clinic in Alexandra, the township on the periphery of Johannesburg, where some 80 000 people then lived. The Clinic provided the main health services for the township.

Susser had received a three-week exposure to Alexandra Health Centre and University Clinic when he was a medical student. The experience, together with the 'comprehensive vision' of health care which he had received from Sidney and Emily Kark at the training centre at Springfield, Natal, helped determine the direction his career should follow. In his relatively brief spell of medical practice in South Africa, 1951 to 1955, Susser was confirmed in his view that 'the societies men live in determine their chances of health, sickness and death', and he saw the destructive effects on health of the economic and social environments. These perceptions are evident in the first scientific paper which he wrote: it was concerned with medical care in a South African township. He made random sample health surveys, inquiring not only about certain diseases but also about attitudes and health behaviour.

Susser's career at Alexandra and indeed in South Africa came to a rather abrupt end in 1955 when his identification with the people of the township led him to agree to participate in a protest meeting and he faced a real threat of arrest.

For 35 years health services in South Africa have suffered from the loss of people like Mervyn Susser. Some of them, and Susser is a shining example, have not only kept alive their vision of an effective, just, health-care service, but have shared their views with and inspired numerous colleagues and students in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and a number of Third World countries, which Susser has visited for significant periods of time. This philosophy has had an impact in America and profoundly influenced the World Health Organization policy on primary health care enunciated at Alma Ata.

When he was appointed lecturer in social and preventive medicine at Manchester University in 1957, the realization that he had been practising epidemiology dawned on him. In Manchester Susser was introduced to sociology and anthropology, and the happy marriage of these with medicine equipped him to tackle the many social issues which influence the health of individuals and communities. His now classic textbook *Sociology in Medicine* (1962 and a third edition in 1985) as well as the book entitled *Community Psychiatry: Epidemiologic and Social Themes* (1968) were produced during his Mancunian period.

Since 1966 Mervyn Susser has been Head of Epidemiology at Columbia University, New York City. In 1977 he was appointed Gertrude H Sergievsky Professor of Epidemiology and Director, Gertrude H Sergievsky Center, Faculty of Medicine, Columbia University. He has served as Visiting Professor and Pan American Health Organization Consultant in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Lima, Peru. Since his arrival at Columbia University he has narrowed his focus to the prenatal period and its consequences for subsequent development. There have been numerous publications on this topic, such as the most recent book co-authored by him, *Conception to Birth* (1989), which is concerned with the epidemiology of prenatal development. His works include a fascinating book with Zena Stein as senior author: *Famine and Human Development: The Dutch Hunger Winter, 1944/45* (1975). Finding it necessary to sharpen his understanding of methods of analysis and the problems of logical inference in the ordering of multiple factors responsible for health, Susser produced another book, *Causal Thinking in Health Sciences: Concepts and Strategies in Epidemiology* (1973), which has stimulated much discussion, including an ongoing debate on the relevance of Karl Popper's philosophy to epidemiology. He is the current editor of the highly regarded *American Journal of Public Health*.

In the endeavour to disentangle causal factors in normal traits, like intelligence, as well as in certain disease states, the classical problem of separating the relative contributions of genetic and environmental factors still confounds scientists. Susser, with his son, Ezra, has greatly helped bring order into this extremely complex field, with his recent work on research design and strategies brought together in a book, *Epidemiology, Health and Society* (1987). Susser's research output over the years has been truly prodigious and the impact of these writings on the practice of epidemiology has been immense.

Among the honours conferred on him have been the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh. In addition, he has been honoured as Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine; Fellow of the American Public Health Association; and Fellow of the American Epidemiological Society.

Susser and his wife, Zena Stein, have together played a leading role in supporting and advising prominent persons in the field of medicine opposed to the policy of apartheid and its effects on the health of the individual and the community.

It is most appropriate at this time that the University should bestow on Mervyn Susser, one of its most distinguished medical graduates, the greatest distinction in its gift. His scholarship is known and praised world-wide. His dedication to his fellow human beings, especially the deprived, the downtrodden and the disadvantaged, is an inspiration to all.