

## Veterinary education in South Africa: The Class of 1924

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### ABSTRACT

Veterinary education in South Africa is now more than 80 years old. It started in 1920 when the Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty was created as an integral part of the Veterinary Research Institute at Onderstepoort. Sir Arnold Theiler, the founder of Onderstepoort, was its first Dean. This article concerns itself with some of the known and lesser known developments and actions associated with the creation of the faculty and how it was possible to provide suitable lecturing staff. This is followed by concise descriptions of the life histories of the first 8 veterinarians who graduated from the new faculty in 1924 and subsequently spent their entire working life in government service.

**Key words:** government service, graduates, Onderstepoort, Theiler, veterinary education, 1924.

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The concept of having a local faculty of veterinary science appears to have arisen independently in the minds of several influential people early in the 20th century as it became clear that uniquely African diseases were not being adequately catered for by the existing European facilities to which aspiring veterinarians of necessity had to go for training purposes.

No one promoted the concept of a local faculty of veterinary science more vigorously and determinedly than Sir Arnold Theiler, the first Director of Veterinary Research of the newly created Union of South Africa. His excellent personal relationship with the most eminent politician of the time, Gen. Louis Botha, the first prime minister of the Union, led to the appointment in 1919 of a committee to investigate the advisability of having a school of veterinary science. The decision to create a veterinary faculty at Onderstepoort under the auspices of the Transvaal University College (TUC), in its turn under the aegis of the University of South Africa – Stellenbosch had also been a candidate – had virtually been taken when Botha died from a heart attack on 27 August 1919. Theiler's relationship with Botha's successor, Gen. J C Smuts, was more formal, but the latter confirmed the decision of creating the faculty when he offered Theiler the joint appointment as its first Dean as well as the Director of Veterinary Research in 1919.

The TUC's Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty came into being on 1 April 1920, as

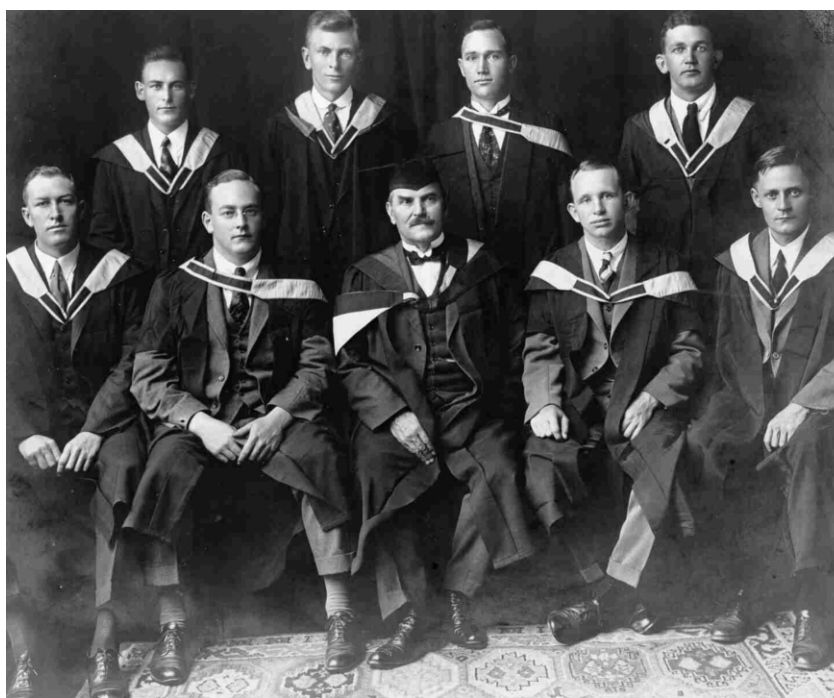
an integral part of the Veterinary Research Institute, served by veterinary researchers who had dual functions to perform, namely research (plus diagnostics) and teaching. The initial teaching staff included eminent veterinary scientists such as P J du Toit – who eventually succeeded Theiler – and Du Toit's successor, Gilles de Kock. Other veterinary scientists were

H H Green, W H Andrews and C P Naser. P J J Fourie ('Oom Flippie'), a later Dean, P R Viljoen, who later became Secretary for Agriculture, M W Henning and A O D Mogg joined the ranks in 1922.

Considerable expansion of the infrastructure at Onderstepoort, mainly to accommodate the new students, took place in the early 1920s, for example the biochemistry wing of the main building, the pathology building, the hospital block and a students' hostel were erected.

It is worth noting that the pioneering 7 students only arrived at the Onderstepoort campus for the specialised courses in veterinary science when the new term opened in 1922. They were then in their 3rd year, having completed the first year in 1920 at a university of their choice providing the required basic courses, and the 2nd year in 1921 at either the TUC or the Johannesburg University College, both of which offered the required courses in veterinary anatomy, physiology and biochemistry at the time. This ruling only changed in

### UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA FIRST BVSc-GRADUANDI 1924



Back row: W J B Green; J H R Bisschop; G Martinaglia; P C Snyman.  
Front row: J I Quin; M Bergh; Sir Arnold Theiler; J G Williams; C v E Mare.

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1926 when the 2nd year was moved to Onderstepoort.

As can be seen in the accompanying photograph 6 students qualified as veterinarians in 1924. Having started off as 7, it is not clear exactly when the 8th one, Giovanni Martinaglia, joined them. He was apparently an orphan who spent his early years in the Abraham Kriel orphanage in Langlaagte. After winning 'seven hundred pounds' in a sweepstake, he proceeded first to the University of Toronto (Canada), where he obtained a BSc degree in 1919, and then to America's Cornell University for a MSc degree in 1920. He then returned to South Africa in 1922, presumably joining the 3rd-year class. After qualifying at Onderstepoort he served as veterinary research officer under Sir Arnold Theiler, first at the Allerton Laboratory and then at Onderstepoort. In 1929 he obtained a DVSc degree from the University of Toronto. He was appointed municipal veterinarian to the Johannesburg abattoir in 1930, ending his pre-retirement career in public health as Director of the abattoir. He died at the age of 79 in 1967.

Perhaps the greatest achiever of the 1924 class was J I Quin, known as 'Pinky' to his students, who was the first Onderstepoort BVSc graduate to qualify with honours. He also obtained a DVSc degree (*cum laude*) in 1928. Like the rest of his classmates, he immediately joined the government service, spending the rest of his career at Onderstepoort. He became Professor of Physiology in 1934 (all faculty posts were part-time appointments in those days) and did excellent research on photosensitivity, especially geeldikkop. In April 1949 he was appointed Director of Veterinary Services and Dean of the Veterinary Faculty at Onderstepoort, but died of a heart attack within a year at the age of only 50 in March 1950. This happened during a train journey while on an official trip.

Probably even better known was 'Baas' (John Henri Roosegaarde) Bisschop.

Students encountered this colourful character as teacher (professor from 1936) in Zootechnics from 1930 to 1962 when he retired. He was a specialist in animal breeding, having obtained a BSc (Agric) degree prior to his BVSc studies at Onderstepoort, and was involved in many advisory activities concerning indigenous livestock in particular, both locally and in neighbouring states. Particularly noteworthy was his membership of the well-known 'Tomlinson Commission', whose recommendations to make the 'homelands' financially viable, had they been followed, could have changed the course of South Africa for the better as early as 1955. He died at the age of 85 in 1984.

Both P S (Flip) Snyman and J G (Hardy) Williams joined the Division of Veterinary Services in 1925, serving as government veterinary officers at various places in South Africa. Snyman also spent several years at Onderstepoort and obtained a DVSc degree for his thesis on rabies research in 1940. Both ended their pre-retirement careers as Director of Field Services, Snyman from 1946 to his retirement in 1959, and Williams from 1959 to 1960 when he retired. Snyman died at the age of 72 in 1971, whereas Williams was destined to outlive all his classmates by several years, dying in 1989 at the ripe old age of 89.

M ('Mike') Bergh was a brother of the well known Springbok rugby player Ferdie. He spent his entire career in the Division of Veterinary Services, serving, for example, as state veterinarian at various localities such as Piet Retief and Louis Trichardt during the East Coast fever eradication campaign. One of his claims to fame is that he did not hesitate to prosecute a Minister of Agriculture, while at Piet Retief, for failing to dip some heifers. Was the minister concerned perhaps Theiler's pet aversion, Gen. J C G Kemp? Mike's last position before he retired from government service was in Johannesburg.

W J B Green was appointed veterinary research officer at Onderstepoort in 1925, and also spent part of his career at the Allerton Laboratory. However, he had a serious heart problem and died at the young age of 35 in 1936.

After a few months at Onderstepoort, where he was replaced by Bisschop, Carl von Eberhardt Maré spent virtually his entire career in the Division of Veterinary Services as state veterinarian, especially in Mafeking. Maré died in Mafeking in 1974 at the age of 80.

Suitably capped and gowned, as is clear from the photograph, Sir Arnold Theiler officiated as Dean at the graduation ceremony of his first students. Less well known is that he lectured to them in pathology, although the burden must have been borne to a considerable extent by other staff members, such as Professor Gilles de Kock and others, because Theiler spent a good deal of the first 4 years of the faculty's existence on various overseas visits.

Theiler was to officiate at only one more graduation ceremony, as will be outlined in a further communication.

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