



Hatter Institute for Cardiovascular Research in Africa, University of Cape Town

## Lionel Henry Opie

Leading African cardiologist. He was born in Hanover, South Africa, on May 6, 1933, and died in Cape Town, South Africa, on Feb 20, 2020, aged 86 years.

“Africa’s greatest living heart doctor.” That was how Lionel Opie, Professor of Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT), was described in the accolade that accompanied his 2006 award of the Order of Mapungubwe, a South African national honour for excellence and exceptional achievement. A glance at Opie’s biography makes it clear why he would be in the running for such an award. But another and more contextual factor surely played a part in the choice. He boosted pride and self-confidence within the South African medical community, says Ntobeko Ntusi, Professor of Medicine at UCT and Principal Investigator with the Hatter Institute for Cardiovascular Research in Africa: “He was the first real academic superstar to come out of Cape Town in the health sciences who stayed in Africa and chose not to go abroad...He showed that you could achieve excellence and global recognition by answering important questions while still working in Africa.” Among the first generation of clinician scientists to emerge in South Africa, Ntusi adds, Opie was an important role model.

To say that Opie worked in Africa is not to suggest that he ignored the training opportunities available elsewhere. His medical degree at UCT was followed by an internship at Cape Town’s Groote Schuur Hospital, but 1957 found him in the UK at the Department of Neurology at Oxford University and starting a PhD. During the next decade, he worked

at London’s Hammersmith Hospital, Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston, Toronto General Hospital, the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, and finally once again at Hammersmith, where he became a consultant with a post at the then Royal Postgraduate Medical School. But in 1971, Opie returned to full-time jobs in his home country.

Appointments at Groote Schuur Hospital and UCT were combined with the directorship of the South African Medical Research Council’s Research Unit for Ischaemic Heart Disease, a position he held from 1976 to 1997. In 1980, UCT granted him a personal chair in medicine. His research over that period included studies on heart failure, cardiac metabolism during ischaemia, reperfusion injury, and cardioprotection. “He also had an interest in the management of hypertension, and worked on the mechanism of  $\beta$  blockers in lowering blood pressure peripherally and centrally”, says Ntusi.

In 1997, Derek Yellon, the South African born Professor of Molecular and Cellular Cardiology and Director of the Hatter Cardiovascular Institute at University College London, UK, was asked by UCT for help in setting up a new academic department. Yellon’s suggestion was to create an African branch of the Hatter Institute. This was around the time that Opie was due to retire, and he was the obvious person to take on the founding directorship. “He was delighted”, says Yellon. “It gave him another 20 years in cardiovascular medicine.” “As a way of celebrating the advent of the Hatter Institute, Opie and I decided to have a meeting [on cardiology] at the university”, Yellon recalls. “It was a 2-day symposium on academic cardiovascular medicine.” The meeting was successful and, under the title Cardiology at the Limits, has been repeated ever since, though with a brief widened to include diabetes and nephrology.

“Lionel played a huge part in promoting cardiovascular research”, says Professor Sandrine Lecour, Deputy Director of the Hatter Institute for Cardiovascular Research in Africa. Opie was also a prolific book editor and writer; among the best known of his output is *Drugs for the Heart*. In 1970, jointly with cardiologist Richard Bing, Opie created the *Journal of Molecular and Cellular Cardiology*, which became the official journal of the International Society for Heart Research. Lecour talks of Opie’s “humility, integrity, and passion...He was a man driven all the time by trying to challenge things. He liked to run a disciplined lab, but he had a soft heart...He was very respectful of others.” Yellon describes his long-standing friend as a convivial man who “loved his food and loved his wine and liked chatting about many things—but always came back to talking about work.” Opie loved science, Yellon adds: “Where some people might read a crime thriller, he would read a [scientific] paper... He was so knowledgeable. If you wanted to find out what happened in some clinical study, he would know.” Opie leaves a wife, Carol, and daughters, Jessica and Amelia.

Geoff Watts