Obituary

Dr Roy E. Pfaltzgraff

In 1971, Eldryd Parry, head of the Department of Medicine at the new Ahmadu Bello University Medical School in Zaria, sent me with 30 medical students across the breadth of Northern Nigeria to Garkida, close to the border with Cameroon. My task was to help Roy Pfaltzgraff, who was Medical Superintendent at the Garkida Leprosarium, to teach the students about leprosy. Most had never seen a case of leprosy, many were fearful. During that fortnight in Garkida, they became competent interested leprologists, better informed about the rural problems of Northern Nigeria and humane budding doctors.

Roy’s experience of leprosy was wide and deep. He had been in Garkida for over 25 years and superintendent for the last 15 years. He was the sole doctor at the leprosarium which he ran with the help of local staff. He had taught himself to do everything necessary to care for patients with leprosy. He was a superb diagnostician, quiet and reassuring with the patients, but never missing a clinical feature. He prescribed management for new cases simply and clearly – anti-leprosy drugs, steroids for reactions, physiotherapy, eye examinations, and footwear. Patients were taught to look after their own hands and feet. He made the rounds of the wards every morning, met and taught his all-Nigerian staff, dealt with the administration, and carried out rehabilitative surgery whenever necessary. And he supervised the rural leprosy teams, whom he had trained. Every patient was a whole person for whom there was a place in life. One old man, with no hands or feet, sat with a bell rope around his arm and tolled the watches through the day.

Roy was also a remarkable teacher. He could get across to the students the basics of all aspects of leprosy. We sat in a circle in the shade of flowering acacias while he demonstrated clinical features on a succession of willing patients. His enormous height, quiet voice, and enviable skills held us in thrall. In the evenings we would watch slide shows that reinforced the lessons of the day. His teaching was laced with anecdotes of life in leprosy and life in Nigeria. Despite apparent isolation for so long, he was always well informed and up to date.

We felt that the course was worthwhile and should be offered annually. What it lacked, however, was a small book on leprosy, suitable for the needs of students. So we started, slowly and painfully, to draft Leprosy for Students of Medicine – so named because we tried to get across a basic understanding of the disciplines involved in leprosy. The first edition, published in 1973, was full of errors born of carelessness and inexperience; the great Stanley Browne found several on every page. We cleaned up for the second edition and ran to a third in 1990, by which time we had both long left Nigeria.

As far as leprosy was concerned, Roy knew it all, did it all and could teach it all. He was always courteous and never rushed. To me he was teacher, guide and firm friend. I asked him once why he made no effort to convert me to Christianity. ‘My faith’, he said, ‘is manifest in my work.’ Violet, his loyal, supportive and ever cheerful wife, provided a warm home to which visitors to Garkida were always made welcome. There they bought up four sons and a daughter, all of whom survive him, together with innumerable grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Anthony Bryceson