

# Dr Henry Lewis FRCS, dies in Potchefstroom at age 90

## OWN CORRESPONDENT

SOUTH AFRICAN born, Dr Henry Lewis FRCS, born on April 21 1918 in Johannesburg, died in Potchefstroom on July 7, at the age of 90.

Lewis was a graduate of London University Medical School and a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (Edinburgh) and was a founder member of the College of Medicine of South Africa and a recipient of the "Life Membership Award" of the Medical Association of South Africa, in recognition of his contribution to medicine.

His parents, Morris and Sylvia, emigrated from Denmark to South Africa. When Henry was eight, the family moved to Potchefstroom, where Morris, a pharmacist had persuaded his employer, the Adcock Ingram Group, to back him in opening a pharmacy in this thriving, farming community, which also boasted a university and a growing Jewish congregation of some 120 families.

Morris soon established himself, repaid his loan to the company, and the family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. Academically astute, Henry matriculated at the age of 16 from SACS Boys High (Cape Town), and was offered a

place at London Hospital Medical School.

His parents, particularly his mother, felt he was too young to leave home - so he completed the first year of his BSc at Wits University. Twelve months later he was off to England, via Germany, where he had enrolled in a six month classic music appreciation course, in Berlin and Vienna.

It was here that the young Henry first encountered National Socialism, the Nazis and their anti-Semitic racist policies. It was an experience that affected him deeply and something he spoke about often.

Lewis graduated in 1942 and spent the war years in London, throughout the Blitz, attending to the injured, healing the maimed and comforting the bereaved. This was a period of his life that he did not speak about.

After VE Day, and the liberation of Europe, Lewis repaired to Edinburgh to continue his studies and practical surgical work, becoming a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (in 1947), focusing on general surgery.

En route to Baltimore, to take up a



position in the department of surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, he first returned to South Africa to visit his mother and brother, Roy, in Potchefstroom, his father having died in 1946.

During his visit, the local community threw a Kiddush in his honour, to "welcome home their favourite son" - where he was introduced to the 17-year-old Reggie Lewin. Some 15 months later they were married, and settled in Potchefstroom, where Lewis practised medicine and, with his new wife, raised a family and built a life together in the Jewish tradition.

Shortly after this, he was appointed resident surgeon at Potchefstroom General Hospital and almost immediately, he established "the bi-weekly clinic", which dispensed free medical treatment, to all the citizens of this small rural town, irrespective of race, colour or creed.

People would travel many kilometres from the surrounding district to receive treatment from Dr Lewis and his medical team.

Apart from medicine, Lewis loved classical music, books, amateur the-

atre, bridge and he was a member of the synagogue choir. He was a Rotarian and served on the governing bodies of all the local high schools in the town.

His warm bedside manner, compassion and sharp wit, along with his ability to communicate with patients and colleagues alike, earned him the respect of his peers and fellowman - far more than he ever imagined or even realised.

The death of his wife, Reggie, from cancer at the age of 48, in 1982, shook him badly. Six years later he married Irene Patlansky, whose husband Jack, a close friend and confidante, had recently died. (Jack Patlansky was a member of the South African Garin, who fought in the 1948 Israel War of Independence).

It was Irene who finally persuaded her husband to put down his scalpel at the age of 76 and enjoy his retirement. He continued, though, working as a teacher/trainer, lecturing and holding physiology workshops for trainee housemen at the Potchefstroom General Hospital. Lewis suffered a slight stroke after a fall on Sunday June 30 at home. He subsequently developed pneumonia and heart failure, and died peacefully on July 7.

He is survived by his wife, Irene, sons Stuart, Alan, Lawrence, daughter, Barbara, stepchildren, Philip and Margo and grandchildren, from both sides. His funeral service was held at Potchefstroom Jewish Cemetery, where the eulogy was delivered by his eldest son, Stuart.