

Prof. Eric Bateman: 1947 - 2024

Eric has sadly been taken away from us far too soon. In writing this obituary, I am very aware of how much he achieved in his life, and how much he touched the lives of so many people around the world. Eric was a brilliant academic and researcher, with several hundred academic publications and numerous awards and accolades. So much so that in his later years no one really introduced him when he spoke at meetings; we all knew him and what he had achieved, and we were already paying attention – because it was Eric.

Eric wore many hats throughout his life, and I was privileged to see him in many of them. As a child I spent many early mornings drinking tea in the Bateman kitchen (everything happens in the kitchen) before heading out to various running races. Eric has the most impressive running record, with gold medals in the Comrades and Two Oceans marathons, and personal best times that his registrars only ever dreamed of. He gardened and fixed up their Park Road house – but also their family holiday home in Betty's Bay, never far from a spade and wheelbarrow or a paintbrush and ladder. The A-rated scientist planting grass and moving bricks. However, Eric did not like surfing or riding bicycles.

Eric taught and lectured as a master craftsman, having rigorously distilled the data, made his own slides to represent the published data, and provided insights and understanding that very few I have ever heard lecture could match. He was also interested in the 'How and why?' and often had the background story as to how things came about or why things were like they were, and knew that little extra bit of information that made the rest all make sense.

Eric was a clinician first and foremost, and his scribbly handwriting is still present in many respiratory clinic patient notes. An 83-year-old patient I saw today remembers



Professor Eric Bateman.

Eric from the early eighties, his notes all over her thick respiratory file. One memory of Eric from clinic speaks to his skill and understanding of respiratory disease. As a registrar in clinic, I presented what I thought was a slam dunk case – listing all the clinical history, with the related signs and how they linked, and ultimately confidently proclaimed my diagnosis. He reflected on each of the points I had made, subtly adjusted the links between them, and came up with an altogether different (correct) diagnosis.

Eric was patient, humble and diplomatic to a fault, and on only a few occasions did I see him break and, choosing his words carefully (which he always did), bring an awkward situation to an end. A young company representative was sharing some new trial data with our research team, dutifully explaining the various aspects of the trials (as they probably had been taught from a standard memo), the exacerbations, the medications, etc. After about 5 minutes

of these ramblings, Eric finally could not take the butchering of data, misinterpretation and poor representation of the trial. He politely pointed out that this was his trial, succinctly summarised the key points, and we moved on. Eric did not choose the stage, or crave the spotlight, but he would always speak up when the scientific accuracy and conclusions were not on point.

Eric was also extremely generous with his time and knowledge. He was always busy, so you might have to wait, or try to bribe Ursula for an earlier appointment, but such was the nature of Eric – the sound advice, clear evaluation of the work/problem, and encouragement were worth waiting for. I am sure it helped that he needed only a few hours of sleep, could cross time zones like a skilled Ninja, and could work late into the night. One evening during an ICU call as medical officer, I needed assistance with a scope. Eric duly arrived in the ICU wearing his sheepskin slippers, having been working late at the Lung Institute. This was Eric – so very normal, yet so completely extraordinary.

All of us will have unique and fond memories of Eric, as he touched so many lives around the world – this is just who he was. He somehow managed to hold this global status, alongside his sheepskin slippers with a cup of tea in hand, with such grace that you would never know. This was Eric – respiratory pioneer, advocate, warrior, visionary, family man, friend, runner and tea drinker. His legacy lives on in innumerable academic outputs, but probably more so in the lives of his family, colleagues and patients.

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