

AG Oettlé Memorial Medal

Dr Alfred George Oettlé was born in Port Elizabeth in 1919 and graduated MBBCH from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1942. He obtained his BSc (Hons) degree in 1940. Throughout his undergraduate career, he achieved first-class honours in almost every subject and was the recipient of no less than five awards while a student at the University from 1936-1940. For seven years after his graduation, he worked in the Department of Anatomy. During this time, he was awarded a Nuffield Foundation Medical Fellowship at the University of Oxford and spent 15 months in the Department of Haematology at the Radcliffe Infirmary. Later he was awarded the Lady Cade Memorial Fellowship, which he used to study cancer research methods in various laboratories in Europe.

Upon his return to South Africa in 1951, he was appointed Cancer Research Fellow at the South African Institute for Medical Research (SAIMR). Gradually he built up around him a unit whose name and fame became known and admired in every corner of the world where cancer research was in progress. Recognising the quality of his work, the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) decided in 1958 to give him full financial support and from that date, his unit at the SAIMR became the responsibility of CANSA.

Dr Oettlé served the Association with distinction until his death on 6 November 1967 at the age of 47. His research over 16 years strengthened the theory that the environment might be all important in the cause of cancer. Dr Oettlé broke new ground by conducting a survey of the rates of cancer in South African communities. This survey, planned with meticulous attention to detail, has become the standard pattern for similar surveys where accurate statistics are not available. As a result of this work, he became convinced that at least 80 percent of cancers were induced by environmental factors and were therefore, at least theoretically, preventable.

Dismayed and distressed by the early death of this brilliant research worker, his colleagues gathered a sum of money, which was donated to CANSA with the request that a memorial to him be established. The Association decided on 31 March 1969 to endow a medal to be known as the Oettlé Memorial Medal.

This medal may be awarded to South African(s) who (a) through original research have made valuable contributions regarding cancer or (b) rendered service of outstanding value to the Association.