



## OBITUARY

### ROBERT S DESOWITZ

January 2, 1926 – March 24, 2008

Robert Desowitz obtained his PhD from the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in 1951. On completing his PhD Bob moved to West African Institute For Trypanosomiasis in Nigeria and worked there until 1960.

In 1961 he joined the faculty of Medicine, University of Singapore as chair of Parasitology. He succeeded Professor AA Sandosham as Professor of Parasitology there. In that way he and Sandy (as he was fondly known) became, sort of, the geographically polarized agents for their respective groups. In his own words there was a truly remarkable, exhilarating era for tropical medicine/parasitology in the entire Malaysian-Indonesian Archipelago. Among the researchers, a unique international amalgam, there was a warm clubiness working together in the field or in the laboratory, or demolishing prodigious amounts of satay and chili crab; to him they were a band of brothers and sisters.

During that era there was so much exciting and varied research coming from the Malaysian and regional laboratories that made Bob and Sandy host laboratory demonstration in parasitology held at six-monthly intervals alternating between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur under the auspicious of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (London). Bob was appointed the local secretary of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. The abstracts of the laboratory meetings were published in the transactions of RSTMH for two years after which the editor closed them down. This left them organized but with no organization. Thus, in 1964 the Malaysian Society of Parasitology and Tropical Medicine was formed with Sandy as its first President and Bob became the 2<sup>nd</sup> President in 1965. He was made an honorary fellow in 1977.

In 1966, he left Singapore for Bangkok where he worked in SEATO laboratory and in 1968 took up his position as Professor of Tropical Medicine and Medical Microbiology in the school of Public Health, University of Hawaii until his retirement in 1995. He then moved to Pinehurst, North Carolina and was an Adjunct Professor of Epidemiology at the University of North Carolina.

In 2004, the President of the MSPTM managed to trace Bob and invited him to attend the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the MSPTM. In his own words he said that “it made him feel like an erring, negligent grandfather who left the family when his grandchild was a toddler only to return 40 years later to find the toddler now grown to a vigorous, accomplished adult of high international renown.” Bob was invited to present the Sandosham Memorial Lecture that year. In his lecture “Malaria: the Morality Play” he addressed, the questions, failures, and remedies into a historical contemporaneous perspective.





In 2007 the Society again invited Bob to be the keynote speaker at the 43<sup>rd</sup> MSPTM seminar in collaboration with the centenary celebration of RSTMH. His paper was on “advances in biotechnology in tropical medicine”.

Bob was not only an active researcher in the field of malaria but was also the author of 5 fantastic books: *New Guinea Tapeworms and Jewish Grandmothers*, *The Thorn in the Starfish*, *Who Gave the Pinta to the Santa Maria?*, *The Malaria Capers* and *Federal Bodysnatchers and the New Guinea Virus*. I was fortunate to have the last two books personally autographed by him. *The Malaria Capers* is on tales of parasites and people which even a layman can understand. To quote from *New York Times* “Reads like a murder mystery....(Desowitz) writes with uncommon lucidity and verve, leaving the reader with a vivid understanding of malaria and other tropical diseases, and the ways in which culture, climate and politics have affected their spread and containment.”

Robert Desowitz will be greatly missed by all of us in the Malaysian Society of Parasitology and Tropical Medicine. He leaves behind his wife Carrolee, a son, a daughter and 4 grandsons. To them we convey our deepest condolence.

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Editor  
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