

ERNEST W PRICE, OBE, MD, FRCSE, DTM & H 1907–90

Dr Ernest Price joined the leprosy service in the then eastern province of Nigeria in 1957, after serving for 21 years in Baptist Missionary Society Hospitals in Zaire, the last 10 years of those spent as a specialist in orthopaedic surgery. In Nigeria, he served first at Uzuakoli under the late Dr T F Davey, and later was transferred to Oji river where it was intended to establish a leprosy surgical unit.

Based on his experience in orthopaedics and with leprosy work in Zaire, Dr Price very quickly concluded that ulcers of the foot constituted a major unsolved problem in leprosy, and immediately began to make significant contributions to the understanding of the problem. Publications flowed from his pen following his extensive studies of patients, as did a variety of simple footwear designed to prevent the recurrence of ulcers. This work, together with the work concurrently being undertaken by Dr Paul W Brand and his colleagues in India, had a revolutionary impact on ideas concerning the aetiology and treatment of ulcers occurring in neuropathic feet.

The end of Dr Price's first tour in Nigeria was marred by involvement in a head-on collision which almost cost him his life. A few months later he was again seriously ill, following a gastrointestinal haemorrhage that occurred while he was attending a conference in Zaire, at which he presented his work on foot ulceration. Following these episodes he was unable to return to Nigeria, but after being in England for a little over three years, he went back to Africa. This time his post was in Ethiopia, at the Princess Zenabework Hospital in Addis Ababa. There he held the position of Leprosy Advisor to the Ministry of Health.

Dr Price quickly came to the conclusion that the major problem to be solved in leprosy in Ethiopia was not ulceration of the foot or even disability generally, but the fact that patients were not able to obtain access to chemotherapy early enough in the disease for there to be reasonable possibilities for the prevention of disability altogether. This understanding led him to organize and find funds for the support of simple clinics in rural areas, often in rented huts in market places from which the majority of patients began their journeys to Addis. In the course of time the existence of these clinics resulted in a drastic reduction in the numbers of patients migrating to the metropolis. This work became the foundation of the present national leprosy control programme.

Concurrent with the establishing of rural clinics, Dr Price reversed the former policy of more-or-less open admission of patients and their families to the hospital in Addis Ababa, and helped to institute a programme of settlement of displaced and homeless patients in agricultural settlements far from the city.

In 1965, Dr Price welcomed the establishment of ALERT in Addis Ababa. He made many important contributions to the development of ALERT and was an influential member of its Board of Directors until he left Ethiopia.

During his time in Ethiopia, Dr Price became interested in nonfilarial elephantiasis, a widespread problem in Ethiopia as well as elsewhere in Africa, and the cause of significant disability. In this field also he made important contributions, pioneering methods for the alleviation of swelling and prevention of its occurrence. His efforts to elucidate the cause of this problem continued after he retired from Ethiopia in 1974, and shortly before he died his extensive monograph on this topic was accepted for publication.

Ernest Price was a man of many talents—a first-rate pianist, who also became an accomplished cellist later in life. During his first 10 years in Africa he became fluent in Lingala and in the local Ngombe language, and wrote a grammar in Ngombe which is still in use. He was an excellent teacher. His deep concern for leprosy patients and those with elephantiasis grew out of his Christian convictions, 'which sustained and motivated him throughout his life'.

He is survived by his wife Marjorie and by his son, Michael, and daughter, Gilian.

W FELTON ROSS