

**Obituary: Professor Kenneth Cunningham Rankin FRCS,
FCS (ECSA), OBE,
Orthopaedic Surgeon, Human Rights Activist and Past President of ASEA**



Born 22 January, 1939. Died in Newcastle, 3 July, 2011, aged 72.

Kenneth Cunningham Rankin was born in Egypt on 22nd January 1939 to George Rankin and Christina Cunningham, while his father was serving with the Royal Air Force in Alexandria. He undertook his undergraduate training at Edinburgh University and graduated in 1963. As a student Ken was inspired by the work of the medical missionary Albert Schweitzer in Africa. He later served in various surgical posts in Edinburgh and his spare time was taken up with hill walking and sailing with friends which became passionate lifetime pursuits. After acquiring his Fellowship in surgery he was appointed as ship's doctor on the Canberra and voyaged to Australia.

In 1966 he worked as a Registrar in Paediatric Surgery in Edinburgh. His professional contact with Africa started when he joined the medical team at the Sibasa Rural Hospital in the Limpopo Province of South Africa in

1967. The following year he moved to Baragwanath Hospital, Soweto and was attached to KwaZulu Natal. While working there he also visited the rural areas in Natal and elsewhere in order to assist people displaced by the apartheid regime. It was during the course of this work that he met his future wife, a journalist and political activist Joyce Sikakane to whom he became secretly engaged. The harsh apartheid laws forbade an inter-racial marriage and the two made plans to marry outside South Africa. However Joyce was detained by the authorities so in 1969 Ken and Joyce separately left South Africa but their reunion was delayed by the detention of Joyce under the Apartheid Regime.

Ken returned to Scotland where he continued his training until 1971 when he returned to Africa working first as a Senior Registrar and later as Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at

Lusaka University Teaching Hospital in Zambia. By God's grace, Ken was re-united with Joyce after her 'release' and exile from South Africa. During his stay in Zambia Ken took up flying and gained a private pilot's licence. He later also became a 'flying doctor.'

On 27th of March 1974 Ken married Joyce in Lusaka at a function attended by close friends. In 1975 the couple returned to Scotland where Ken worked as a Lecturer in orthopaedic surgery at the University of Edinburgh. In 1977 the family moved to Dundee where Ken became Senior Lecturer with a special interest in paediatric orthopaedics. In 1977 the Family had grown to five lively children. Despite their family and professional duties Ken and Joyce did not abandon their commitment to the Anti-Apartheid movement and remained fully involved in the United Kingdom branch participating in fund raising events.

In 1980 Ken and his family moved to the Central Hospital in Maputo where he did much to promote and advance the education of young doctors. However because of their anti-apartheid actions and association with the African National Congress (ANC) Ken and his wife and children were forced to move in 1982 to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Here he worked as the only consultant orthopaedic surgeon for a population of approximately 3 million. In particular he developed interests in spinal tuberculosis, club feet, acute and chronic osteomyelitis and open fractures - even designing and manufacturing the 'Mpilo' external fixator. His practice in Bulawayo extended outside orthopaedics due to a lack of suitably trained colleagues and during particularly busy periods he performed plastic

surgery procedures for coverage of exposed bone as well as maxillofacial operations following trauma. Occasionally his skills were called upon by veterinary surgeons with a notable case featuring the reconstruction of a leopard's forelimb.

His keen involvement with World Orthopaedic Concern (WOC) brought many visiting surgeons to enjoy the delights of Zimbabwe and all returned home enriched personally and professionally. I was one of the WOC surgeons to spend time with Ken in his house in Bulawayo, surrounded by several large dogs, five children and a healthy flock of chickens. These were great and very enjoyable days and I benefited enormously from my close association with this 'master surgeon'.

It was when he was in Bulawayo, that he became a very active Fellow of the Association of Surgeons of East Africa (ASEA) and served a spell as honorary secretary. He became President of ASEA in 1990-1991.

Despite the pressures of work he maintained an enthusiastic interest in his hobbies involving the family in sailing, walking and private flying. Indeed the flying facilitated by sponsorship from the Rotary Club enabled Kenneth to visit remote communities to provide medical care. By 1992 most of the children were pursuing their careers and tertiary education in the UK which forced Ken and Joyce to return to Scotland where Ken worked both in Glasgow and in Lanarkshire. In 1995 Ken and Joyce returned to the 'newly democratic, rainbow nation of South Africa' and Ken was appointed Professor in Pretoria University. He continued his teaching

activities and was appointed the Lipmann Kessel Travelling Professor (of World Orthopaedic Concern UK). He was also elected to the court of examiners of the Edinburgh College as well as continuing as a peripatetic examiner in many African Universities.

In 2002 he was awarded an OBE – for services to orthopaedics in Africa. When his Professorship in Pretoria ended he continued to work in the more rural areas of South Africa always continuing to train surgeons and others. He eventually returned to the UK but when working at the new Royal Edinburgh Infirmary during 2010 he was taken ill during an operating list. Acute myeloid leukaemia was diagnosed, but he fought this with quiet determination gaining remission which allowed him to return to work in Dumfries later that year. A relapse in January 2011 forced his retirement but he again battled hard, enduring more treatment which led to another remission. On 3rd July, 2011, he sadly succumbed to the disease.

I last saw Ken and Joyce at a Global Health Meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine (RSM) a short while before his death. They were both in good form and we had a short talk about ‘the old days’. The world has indeed lost a truly inspirational surgeon and a human rights advocate. I have lost a very good friend.

Professor Kenneth Cunningham Rankin is survived by the widow Joyce, his five children, a sister and one brother.

*Ken Rankin did not often speak of his many activities so I am most grateful to his son Kenny (also an orthopaedic surgeon) for much of the information in this obituary.

Prof Geoffrey Walker
Professor of Orthopaedics



Message of Condolence



On behalf of the Editorial Board and on my own behalf, I extend our most heartfelt condolences to Mrs Joyce Rankin, to the children Oliver, Vikela, Nomzamo, Samora and Alan, to the six grandchildren, and to the sister and brother of Ken. His tremendous contribution to surgery in the region and to The Association of Surgeons of East Africa has left an indelible mark. To many of us who had the opportunity to associate with Professor Rankin, he was indeed a true friend who related well with everyone. He was gentle and always wore a smile on his face. We shall all miss him.

We pray that the Almighty God gives courage to the family to bear this great loss.

Ken, may your soul rest in eternal peace.

Prof Ignatius Kakande
Editor in Chief,
East and Central African Journal of Surgery