The Barkers' achievements at Nqutu are legendary. Despite its impressive name, the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital was rudimentary when they arrived there in 1945: a few dilapidated buildings, a matron, six student nurses and seven patients. Anthony had learned the basics of joinery from the ship’s carpenter during his service as doctor in the merchant navy at the end of the war — his ship had been sunk by torpedo but all on board had been saved. He and Maggie soon had ambitious building plans for their hospital and the whole district it served. Anthony therefore turned what he had learned on board ship to good use at Nqutu. Early on, he did much of the joinery and other building work himself. Both he and Maggie would dig drains and turn their hands to whatever else needed to be done, like sewing mattresses or making hospital furniture. The hospital was grossly underfunded at the outset and remained so for many years to come. Indeed, early visitors to Nqutu, like Eleanor Nash, will remember having to help with all manner of tasks, inspired in most cases by Maggie’s determination and quiet wisdom and Anthony’s enthusiasm. The inadequacy of the tiny mission hospital they came to in 1945 fired their determination and in 30 years they transformed it into a fine rural hospital of 600 beds.

But while they slowly built up the hospital to enable them to provide a much-needed service to the 80 000 inhabitants of the district, they did three things that eventually led to their outstanding success as missionary doctors. They started to learn the language and the culture of their patients, the Zulus; they built up the fine system of remote clinics in the district which enabled them to begin what I should like to call the Barker system of total health care; and, at a time when the evils of apartheid were at their peak, they saw to it that their hospital was a happy oasis where racial discrimination was taboo.

When they came to Nqutu, Anthony’s postgraduate experience in operative surgery was minimal but the remoteness of the hospital forced him to undertake all manner of emergency surgery. He studied the texts in isolation from formal teaching and passed the examinations for the FRCS in London on his first long leave from Nqutu. Some criticised what he tackled through force of circumstance. When others had seen him at work, however, none doubted his expertise. In the early years, because of

Anthony and Maggie Barker with their beloved tandem. (This photo appears in Lives in Tandem, the author’s biography of the Barkers, reviewed by Peter Wogenaar on p. 1186 of this issue.)
the need for and the distance from more sophisticated hospitals, Anthony perfected caesarean section under local anaesthesia and became proficient in cataract operations, the need for both of which was great in the district. Later, when additional trained staff came to Nqutu, he was able successfully to undertake demanding tasks like spinal laminectomy and surgery for carcinoma of the rectum — to mention only some of his field of surgical work. In fact, he was to become a most competent surgeon. Professor LeQuesne of Middlesex Hospital, having been delightfully entertained by both Barkers at Nqutu, and having performed operations with Anthony there, commented in a letter to me that 'Anthony was certainly one of the most complete, remarkable men that I have known — indeed, the most.' And his expertise was not limited to surgery. From my own experience as an occasional visiting consultant, he was also a skilled physician. Indeed, his excellence as a doctor covered most of the spectrum of medical practice.

Anthony was much in demand as a public speaker. Many will remember his forceful, wise and witty speeches. He was also a talented writer. His book, Giving and Receiving, first published in 1959, 2 and reprinted twice since then, is a delightful and thought-provoking account of rural medicine as he and Maggie practised it at Charles Johnson Hospital. After their tragic deaths on their tandem in 1993, Anthony left behind him a mass of unpublished material to which I have had access. It makes fascinating reading, especially for his turn of phrase, his wit and his descriptive writing. His depth of care for the welfare of others comes through strongly. Elsewhere I have reproduced excerpts from his writings.3

Lacking Anthony's flamboyant, exuberant, highly articulate persona, Maggie was quiet, deep and wise — and an excellent doctor. Those visiting Nqutu briefly might have thought her content to make her role in the marriage a supporting one. This, clearly, is an incomplete picture. She was talented and innovative in her main area of clinical competence — children and maternity cases, introducing much that was well ahead of her time, as Larsen 4 pointed out. Elsewhere I have reproduced excerpts from her writings.3

In her own certainty that what they were doing at Nqutu was right, Maggie happily accepted Anthony as the front man. He undoubtedly had all the characteristics. What was so important to their dual role as man and wife working as a missionary doctor team is the fact that they discussed all manner of issues together, first one having new ideas, then the other. Only when consensus was reached did they put their plans into action. His speeches, too, often revealed her thoughts as well as his own, as did his writings.

Both Barkers were deeply concerned about much that was outside the bounds of their profession, like 'green' issues, the dangers of nuclear power, and the care of the elderly. They lived frugally and donated handsomely to charity. Indeed, keen cyclists as they were, Anthony and Maggie rode together on many sponsored rides, best known of which was the 1 000-mile ride from Slovenia to Calais in 12 days, in the course of which they travelled over the Dolomites and Austrian Alps and through Germany and France, often sleeping rough, to collect £12 000 for Alexandra Clinic (where they had worked in their retirement). In all, they were to raise some £60 000 for various charities, and sometimes covered as much as 100 miles each day. Sad as it was, perhaps it was appropriate that they died together on their tandem in a road accident in the English Lake District, both in their 70s.

Honours were showered on Anthony, of which his most prized were perhaps his CBE, honorary degrees from Natal and Birmingham, and his election to the London FRCP. Maggie was rather unfairly overlooked. All who knew the Barkers well, however, recognised how inseparable they were in their major contributions to the times in which they lived.

Their personal influence on others is probably immeasurable. Many a young doctor or nurse happily acknowledges the profound influence of the Barkers on their lives; many of these now live abroad, in Britain especially, but also in the USA, Germany, Scandinavia and elsewhere. Literally thousands of visitors came to Nqutu, perhaps to stay for several days; and when Anthony and Maggie left the 'Charlie J' after 30 years to return to England and work at the Accident and Emergency Department of St George's Hospital in London, they again affected the lives of countless others. They were indeed a legend in their own time and, to quote Longfellow, are among those who have left 'footprints on the sands of time'.

REFERENCES

4. Accepted 31 May 1997.