

**Tribute by
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**Dr Dennis Folorunsho Churchill Williams (5212)
2nd July 1944 -24th October 2011**

Dr Dennis F Williams was born in 1944 and so started an international life. Educated at Buxton Infants and Boys School in Freetown Dennis then attended the **prestigious Sierra Leone Grammar School** where he came top of the class. Gaining a scholarship, Dennis received his medical training in Romania at the University of Bucharest Faculty of General Medicine and Pharmacology.

While in the service of his country as a Medical Officer in the Sierra Leone Armed Forces, Dennis received a scholarship in 1982 to study ophthalmology at the University of Freiburg in the then West Germany. Dennis was then seconded to both the Ministry of Health and Sightsavers in 1989 to Segwema hospital and then to Bo where he combined being the most senior ophthalmologist in the country with his role as Country Representative for Sightsavers. Thanks to his training in Europe, Dennis spoke both German and Romanian. On retirement in 2008, Dennis was appointed Vice President of Sightsavers, the first staff member to receive this honour.

Tributes from colleagues, friends and the international community have talked about love, friendship, courage, leadership, a true health professional, humour and humility. One of those is usually enough, but Dennis was also a true gentleman in addition. Anyone who came in contact with Dennis will remember his sense of honour and exceptional manners. A

visit to Sierra Leone on business was always one that was a packed work programme, but that was also filled with fun and inspiration.

Dennis was an example of all that is good about Sierra Leone: a country that has gone through so much pain, but for those who came into touch with Dennis they saw a warm-hearted, welcoming and courageous country that was filled with hope for the future. Dennis was a credit to his country. Sierra Leone has been through such horrors in recent history, but through his work, dedication and selfless disregard for danger Dennis has provided, and will continue to do, a role model for people inside and outside Sierra Leone.

Dennis has had an immeasurable impact on eye health in Sierra Leone. His legacy will remain for generations to come. Dennis worked in Sierra Leone despite threats to his personal safety given the civil war that ravaged the country for many years. Dennis regularly dodged bullets to go to work - he was utterly fearless in making sure patients were still seen and operated on. Under Dennis' leadership Sightsavers was one of the only international non-governmental organisations that remained in Sierra Leone and delivered services during those difficult days.

Dennis was most proud of the eye department at Bo Hospital (Southern Province) – a project he designed and implemented. The department delivered eye care services for the first time in that province and in Sierra Leone's second city. Today over 100 people are screened and receive treatment every day.

Then came the rebuilding of the Department of Ophthalmology in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital city. From a dilapidated building, Freetown now has an eye department that we can be proud of. Every single day of the week over 200-300 people are seen and receive treatment. One of Dennis' proudest moments was when an elderly gentleman asked him where the eye department was and Dennis told him that he was in it. The elderly man cried and asked Dennis if the wonderful building was for him to receive treatment at. Dennis replied "of course" and asked "why the question?" The gentleman replied that "he didn't think palaces could be hospitals and he wasn't used to being in such a fine building". Of course the building was not a palace but a functioning hospital. Dennis always said "this showed

how low expectations had become and how modest changes can make a real difference.” Over 960,000 people have received treatment for eye diseases in projects that have been lead by Dr Williams since 1989. As Sierra Leone’s only consultant ophthalmologist, Dennis was instrumental in returning sight to just over 45,000 people diagnosed with cataract (his own operations and those under his medical supervision). Countless other medical interventions have been carried out too. Dennis’ own eyesight tragically got worse before his retirement which meant he could not undertake surgeries anymore. Dennis was angry and frustrated by this. Through succession planning (Dennis would never call it that though – he would call it just plain 'common sense') others were trained in ophthalmology. Dennis leaves a doctor of ophthalmology, ophthalmic nurses and cataract surgeons providing service throughout the county.

In 2002 and 2003 Dennis was instrumental at drawing the international communities’ attention to the disease of River Blindness (onchocerciasis) in Sierra Leone and the need to restart the distribution of a donated drug, Mectizan, to three million people throughout the country. Distribution of the drug was interrupted because of the civil war. Dennis hated public speaking, but was so good at it when he got going. Many hours were spent practicing and worrying prior to any speaking engagement. At an international meeting on River Blindness in Washington DC, hosted by the World Bank, Dennis cajoled persuaded and shamed the international community to act. Thousands of communities throughout the country are now protected as a result from the blindness caused by this disease through Dennis’ determination.

Dennis was instrumental in advocating for the passing of the Disability Bill in the parliament of Sierra Leone. His efforts at supporting the drafting of the bill will ensure a legacy to his hard work and beliefs.

But life is not all work and Dennis certainly lived life to the full. Everyone who got to know Dennis has memories of evenings of laughter, joy and dancing. I took Dennis to Scotland for his 60th birthday. We decided to stay in a hotel at Loch Torridon in the wilds of the highlands. After dinner we retired to the bar and Dennis asked for his favourite tipple (a

whiskey), the barman replied “which one of the 400 varieties stocked in the bar would you like?” Dennis’ exploded with joy and said “we will start at number one and go as far as we could.” A delightfully long evening followed. I did notice that Dennis refused the porridge with cream and a dram of whiskey on offer at breakfast the following morning though.

We all will have many abiding memories of Dennis. One of mine will be when at the Sir Milton Margai School for the Blind and we both listening to the children sing their school song. The children had such power in the voices – music can have such an impact and Dennis loved music. I turned to Dennis and saw that we both had tears in our eyes. Seeing each other in this state and knowing that I was to give a talk to the pupils, Dennis quietly led me away and handed me a hankie! This says everything about Dennis - caring humanity. Another vivid memory is of a Sightsavers group visiting the President of Liberia in 2006 and Dennis gallantly kissing her on the hand. This was totally unexpected and given the trend of truth and reconciliation in both Sierra Leone and Liberia it was an act that meant so much given the earlier troubled relations between the two countries.

We have lost a great friend and colleague. A life of achievement, dedication and one of humour, love and humility. Dennis was never recognised officially through an honour or award by either the UK (for his services to Sierra Leone-British relations) or by his home country (for services to health). That recognition will come, however, from the thousands of people who have benefitted from eye health services in his beloved Sierra Leone and the hundreds of his friends, colleagues and of course his dear family. As we think of his name, which will be often, we should smile as we remember one of the great forces for good in West Africa. Dennis, we will miss you. Sierra Leone has lost a great son.

Dennis passed away on 24th October 2011 in UK. He leaves behind his wife, Pamela, and children Denise, Meladen, Adefolarin and Dennis Jnr . A service of remembrance will be held in London on 11th November 2011; Dennis will then be laid to rest in Freetown on 18th November 2011.

MAY DENNIS WILLIAMS’S SOUL REST IN PERPECTUAL PEACE!!