

## Tribute to Dr. Dennis Williams (5212) from the Daily Telegraph (UK)



Dr Dennis Williams, who has died aged 67, was the only ophthalmologist working in Sierra Leone during the civil war which lasted from 1991 to 2002. Working for the charity Sightsavers, Williams regularly braved the battlefield to go to work and ensure that patients were still treated and operated on. Under his leadership, Sightsavers was one of the few international non-governmental organisations to remain in Sierra Leone throughout the war.

Dennis Folorunsho Churchill Williams was born on July 2 1944 in Freetown and educated at Sierra Leone Grammar School, later gaining a scholarship to the University of Bucharest's faculty of General Medicine and Pharmacology. He was inspired to work as an ophthalmologist after his uncle was blinded by cataracts.

He later served as a medical officer with the Sierra Leone Armed Forces and won another scholarship, to study Ophthalmology at the University of Freiburg in what was then West Germany.

Since 1989, more than 960,000 people in Sierra Leone have received treatment for eye diseases in projects led by Williams. For most of his career he was the only consultant ophthalmologist in the country, and is credited with restoring the eyesight of 45,000 people diagnosed with cataracts.

Williams also had a huge impact on the rights of the blind and disabled. He lobbied for the Disability Bill, recently passed in the Sierra Leone parliament, to try to ensure that the needs of the disabled were properly addressed.

While working with Sightsavers during the civil war, Williams was based at Segbwema, a major conflict zone in the east of the country only 100 miles from the border with Liberia. Despite the dangers, he and his team carried on working there for as long as they could. Eventually they had to relocate to a hospital at Bo, in central Sierra Leone, leaving a skeleton staff in Segbwema. At one point the hospital in Bo was vandalised; only the eye care department was left undamaged, and for some months it became a sanctuary for around 500 people escaping the conflict.

As the war came to an end, Williams was instrumental in drawing the international community's attention to a potentially blinding disease, onchocerciasis (river blindness), in Sierra Leone, emphasising the need to resume the distribution of

drugs that had been interrupted by the conflict. At an international conference on river blindness in 2002, hosted by the World Bank, Williams was among those who persuaded the international community to act. Thousands of communities throughout Sierra Leone are now protected from possible blindness thanks to his determination.

On retiring in 2008, Williams was appointed vice-president of Sightsavers, the first staff member to receive this honour.

His own eyesight had deteriorated before his retirement, and he had to give up performing surgery. By this time, however, he had trained a doctor of ophthalmology, ophthalmic nurses and cataract surgeons who now provide services throughout the country.

Dennis Williams, who was suffering from cancer, is survived by his wife, Pamela, and four children.

**MAY DENNIS WILLIAMS'S SOUL REST IN PERPECTUAL PEACE!!**