

## An Interview with Professor Holman Williams: Reflections on Establishing the School of Veterinary Medicine, Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies

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### Introduction

In celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the School of Veterinary Medicine (SVM) of The University of the West Indies (UWI), the SVM community is pleased to highlight the contribution of one of our early visionaries. Professor Holman Williams was instrumental in establishing our school and for over sixty years, demonstrated his commitment to the development of the veterinary profession. Now in his eighties and seated before me on the verandah of his St. Ann's home, the Professor reflected on his vision for the SVM back then and the contributions he made while realizing his vision.

### Professional Pursuits

Holman Williams is an Emeritus Professor of Livestock Science of the UWI. Sitting across from me the Professor described his two careers, the first which began in his youth during the colonial era of Trinidad and Tobago saw him progress from Veterinary Officer to Chief, and the second, brought him to us at the UWI.

#### *Can you describe your career and accomplishments in the context of Veterinary Medicine?*

"I knew early in life that I wanted to be a Vet and that helped...it saved a lot of time, no false starts" (smile). With a clear idea of what he wanted, Professor Williams began by successfully completing the first year of the Diploma of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, ICTA (the forerunner to the UWI St. Augustine Campus). This allowed him to matriculate to the Ontario Veterinary College where he spent four years, graduating in 1949 with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree. He then went directly to the University of Wisconsin where he completed a Master of Science degree. Newly equipped with knowledge and training in the area of Veterinary Parasitology, his application to the Colonial Office in London was accepted and he was subsequently stationed in Trinidad. As a Veterinary Officer, he spent the next five years between both sister isles until his departure to the University of Edinburgh where in 1958 he graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Virology. Upon his return, he continued his public service for about a decade moving through several positions until he rose to the rank of Technical Officer, Animal Health (Chief Veterinary Officer).



*A younger Professor Williams*

He sees his second career which was at the UWI as an opportunity to serve both Trinidad and Tobago and the regional countries supporting the UWI. Professor Williams joined the UWI as a Lecturer and soon became Head of the Department of Livestock Science in the Faculty of Agriculture. For many years, he continued to work in this department until he became the Professor of Livestock Science. Professor Williams retired while in this position.

His official retirement was in 1991 but Professor Williams has followed the path of 'active retirement' with his involvement in projects of both personal and professional interest. He remained a member of the Veterinary Surgeons' Registration Board of Trinidad and Tobago until 1998 (having been Chairman of that Board for six years) and continued to lecture part-time in the areas of Veterinary Parasitology and Large

Animal Medicine at the SVM until 2008. Recently, his expertise was sought by the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) for the preparation of a proposal for entry into an Agricultural Technology Program. Further to this, he prepared the Accreditation Policies and Procedures in Veterinary Medical Education for the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and Other Health Professions (CAAM-HP).

### The Establishment of the UWI/SVM

*Can you describe the motivation behind the establishment of the UWI SVM and the role that you played?*

“Well, in the days before the SVM students had to travel abroad for veterinary training. During that period in time, veterinary schools abroad were rather pressed for space so one had to be a Government Scholar or Sponsored Student to get into these schools because of the competition. [Eventually] it was recognized that perhaps we needed a veterinary school for the region and when the decision was made to establish the school, I was invited by the Trinidad and Tobago Government to form part of the task force that built the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex (EWMSC)”.

Professor Williams served on the EWMSC Task Force from 1979 to 1987. During that period, the Complex comprised the Faculty of Medical Sciences and Teaching Hospitals (Human and Animal). While the Task Force oversaw the development of the entire Complex, Professor Williams, Professor Centeno-Amoroso and three expatriates worked along with architects to guide the design, erection and equipping of the SVM. “I think it was a difficult exercise because what mattered was what the people who were going to work in the school wanted or visualized. Since I have never heard any complaints, I would assume that we did a reasonably good job in putting down the physical plant that is the veterinary school. The building designed and erected was for the SVM, not the SVM and the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory”.

In addition to his contribution toward the establishment of the physical structure of the SVM, Professor made sure that the Department of Livestock Science; Faculty of Agriculture became involved in the development of the curricula and teaching of livestock production which is an important component of veterinary training especially in the tropics. “Further, I took study leave and I went out to the Far East - to India, Malaysia and Australia. One of the main reasons for that trip was to determine how much of the veterinary course should



*Professor and his wife Mrs. Marina Williams who continues to be integral to his support network*

be devoted to livestock production and so I did that and prepared a report which was useful”.

### *Communicate your vision at that time for the UWI SVM.*

“At that time, I thought that the UWI SVM being the only complete English-speaking veterinary school in the American tropics, administratively and physically in a Faculty of Medical Sciences and in association with the Agricultural, Science and other Faculties in a Regional University, had great potential to attract researchers from around the world to come and work here. I believed that would enhance the research output of the School and the rewards for the institution would go up tremendously and that would help build a good reputation - it seems to me that is a great potential that the school still has today. In addition, the UWI SVM is visited by external examiners every year – as far as I know in other faculties, they visit every three years. The examiners come from other veterinary schools and research institutions and I think it is a great system because they evaluate the School, the teaching and how the students respond to the teaching and as far as I know, the school has always had good ratings from the external examiners. It’s a good system that the School can leverage to improve in areas where there is need for improvement. It is a good system that the School should keep up”.

***What do you hope to see the SVM accomplish in the future?***

“I think one of the ways that the School might improve is by formalizing the externships where students spend their summers working with veterinarians in practice”. Professor Williams expressed that these externships ought to be developed to include Jamaica where there is a large livestock population and Guyana where there is ‘ranching’. He explained that externships in the UK are more formal as supervisors ensure that students spend three to six weeks in the field for example in an abattoir so that students know exactly happens there or on a sheep farm especially when lambing is taking place. In the UK externships are a little more formal; you have to get a certificate from the person supervising you to say that you were there and that you met the requirements. I don’t think that the externships in the region are as formal as in the UK. “In Trinidad for example the poultry industry is well developed so we could have our students go into firms to gain exposure to various areas of the poultry industry, for example, egg production, egg incubation, ducks etc. I don’t think it can all be done in Trinidad”.

Professor believes that it is possible that the UWI SVM could attract non-reginonal/foreign students who would benefit from a full vet program here - “not just pre-veterinary instruction as offered by off-shore vet schools”.

He closed with the following advice - “there is an Institute of Marine Affairs here and the SVM might find it rewarding to collaborate regarding the diseases of pelagic animals and aim to service developing fish farms with health problems”.

Professor Williams expressed his pleasure at being considered for this interview and assured us that this piece did offer an accurate snapshot of his work. The WIVJ thanks the Professor for his invaluable contribution that has clearly transcended the borders of the SVM. Special thanks to his wife Marina who joined him in welcoming and hosting me so graciously.



*Professor Williams with Ms. Golda Dennis after the interview*