

Tony Harrison is chairman of the National Pathology Group (NPG).

Theo Garrun spoke to him about his profession

What is the NPG?

It is a subgroup of the Health Professional Council; in effect a body that caters for the needs of professional pathologists. It is a voluntary organisation that sets standards and ensures that the profession develops.

What is the NPG's role?

We have a stringent code of conduct to which members must adhere. The code covers ethical and professional aspects and transgressions are dealt with via a system of peer review.

The NPG also looks at other issues such as funding - it liaises with the medical aid community; interaction with other specialisations: standards of testing and accreditation of laboratories; the design and content of test request forms; and the design and implementation of new tests and technology.

What is pathology?

Pathology is at the heart of all scientific medicine. It is the science whereby the examination of specimens leads to diagnostic and therapeutic information that can be used to treat patients.

How has pathology changed over the years?

There has been an explosion of new technology in recent years, leading to an explosion in the understanding of diseases. The new equipment can measure minute components and this can be extrapolated, which means that we can now detect diseases much sooner. This early detection is the key to most treatment regimes.

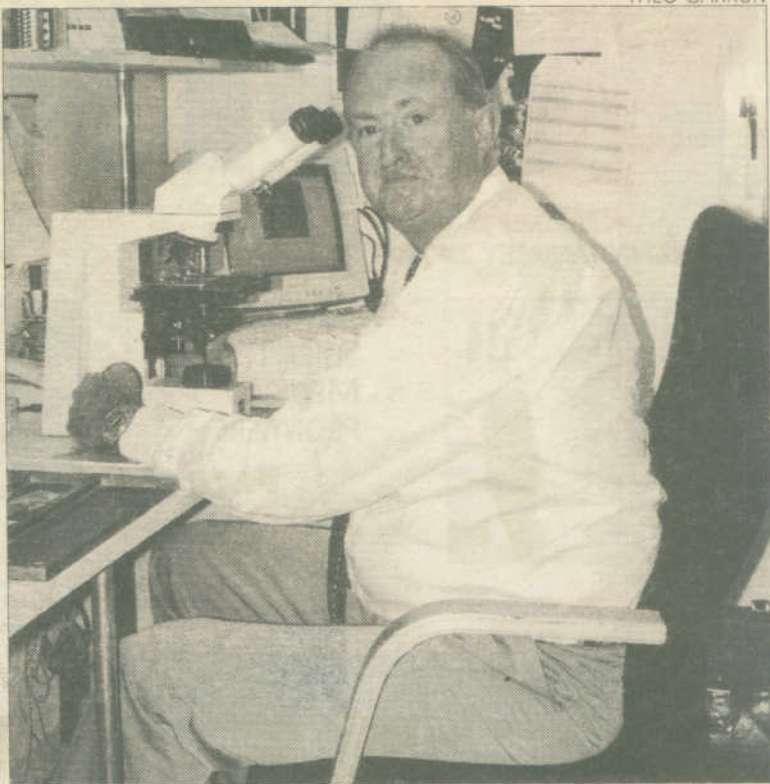
The role of pathology has thus grown tremendously, placing the pathologist, together with other investigative medical specialists, in the centre of diagnosis and treatment.

What is your own background?

I qualified as a doctor in 1972 and specialised in anatomical pathology in 1973. I worked at Groote Schuur hospital in Cape Town for a number of years before moving to Johannesburg in 1980.

I am now a senior partner at Lancet Laboratories, which is one of the big three pathology labs in the country.

I have been on the NPG committee for a number of years and



Great strides ... Tony Harrison believes that advances in pathology have revolutionised the science of diagnosis and treatment of disease.



nice work
if you can get it

The hub of modern medicine

became its chairperson last year.

Describe a typical day for you

I am the head of our anatomical lab and, as such, I play an administrative role in terms of records, ordering and so on. I am responsible for managing the staff of the lab and, most importantly, for ensuring that the required quality controls are in place. We must be sure that the results we send out are 100% accurate.

I interpret test results and examine the specimens. I then either make a diagnosis, or request further investigation. The results are then sent to the referring doctor, with recommendations for further action, if necessary.

I also attend surgical procedures when required and make diagnoses of specimens removed in theatre, advising the surgeon on what action should be taken.

What does the future hold?

No doubt the development in technology will continue. This will make for more mechanisation and fewer people employed in the labs, leading to better diagnosis and treatment of disease, as well as further reclassification of diseases.

But I don't believe that the ability to think laterally and to make decisions based on experience will ever be programmed into a computer, so there will always be a need for pathology specialists.

Has it all been worth it?

This is a fascinating branch of medicine. Although we miss out on the human contact side, it can be very satisfying to know that behind each specimen there is a person anxious for a decision, especially if you supply information that is accurate and do so quickly.