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A changing of the guard at SACEMA

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We're changing the guard at SACEMA. Alex Welte, who has managed "the shop" so effectively for the last five years, has decided to step down. His successor, Dr Juliet Pulliam of the University of Florida, is expected to succeed him in late June 2016. It is appropriate, then, to look back at Alex's substantial contribution to our organisation.

When I drove down to Stellenbosch from Zimbabwe, as inaugural Director of SACEMA, my first port of call was at the Wits Applied Mathematics Department where I met Alex Welte for the first time. I was pointed in that direction by SACEMA's "midwife", Ekkehard Kopp, who had, early and with unerring accuracy, identified Alex as an important potential collaborator for the fledgling institution. It was immediately evident to me that Alex had all the right qualities for somebody to be involved in the mathematical modelling of epidemiology. Not only did he have impeccable mathematical credentials, but he also took infinite pains to get the biology right – the *sine qua non* of effective modelling in our discipline.

Perhaps as a consequence of those qualities Alex managed to attract, through his teaching, a succession of quality students – whom he pointed in the direction of SACEMA. In the early years of SACEMA we were asked by WHO and Statistics Canada to extend to the world of tuberculosis the models they had developed for other purposes. Carel Pretorius, one of Alex's students at Wits, was so successful in this regard that Stats Canada encouraged SACEMA to apply for funding from Canadian CIDA. To cut a long story short, Alex oversaw the entire process: writing up the grant application, travelling to Canada to ensure that we were successful in securing it, and then administering the grant for the duration of our tenure of it – even before he was on the SACEMA staff. Since the CIDA grant virtually doubled SACEMA's budget this was no mean feat.

Given this additional string to his bow, of effective administration of funding, it became apparent that

Alex would make an excellent Director for SACEMA. He resisted the idea for a while, but eventually took over the Directorship in 2010. From the first, Alex brought many new ideas and initiatives. The work that he had been doing with Reshma Kassanjee and Tom McWalter on the estimation of HIV incidence using biomarkers applied to samples from cross-sectional surveys, led to SACEMA taking a leading role in the Consortium for the Evaluation and Performance of HIV Incidence Assays (CEPHIA) – work that continues to the present day and has led already to numerous papers, posters and conference presentations with Alex as a contributing author. This and other work initiated by Alex led to SACEMA becoming the southern Africa hub for the HIV Modelling Consortium.

In the area of training and capacity development Alex, likewise, brought new approaches and an insistence on increased rigour and higher standards among the students. At the same time there has been a substantial expansion in student numbers – with the 2016 enrolment of Masters and PhD programmes almost double that of previous levels. In so doing he has increased the number of students from around Africa, not least among previously disadvantaged students from South Africa itself. Alex also continued to bring in, on short and medium term contracts, interesting new members among the more senior staff, who have made substantial contributions to SACEMA's output.

All of this activity – added to the difficult task of administering SACEMA to the satisfaction of South Africa's Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation – has taken its toll of research time and energy, and Alex feels it is now time to concentrate once again on the active hands-on research work that he holds most dear, and at which he so obviously excels. We give sincere thanks to Alex for his inspirational leadership and for everything he has done for SACEMA during his tenure: we wish him everything of the very best in his continuing career.

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