

BLUE PLAQUE MOTIVATION

Jan Kriel School: Contribution to society

Jan Kriel School (JKS) had humble beginnings. Jan, the son of Rev. and Mrs. Kriel, suffered from epilepsy. Despite the great lengths his parents went to to improve his health, Jan died in 1925. Mrs. Kriel's faith, perseverance and passion to develop a facility for people with epilepsy moved various roleplayers from the public and private sector to invest in the development of the Jan Kriel School and Home. Due to their collective efforts the facility was officially opened by Lady Duncan on 4 May 1937.

In 1942 the decision was made to convert the institution to a school for learners with epilepsy. Dr AP Blignault, the first principal had a passion for people with epilepsy and after he qualified as a medical doctor he published various articles about this condition in the SA Medical Journal of which he later became the editor. He was awarded the Hamilton-Maynard Memorial Medal in 1954 for his work with people with epilepsy.

JKS grew beyond expectation and in 1947 the high school section was established. At the inauguration of the new school building in 1950 JKS was described as the first of its kind in the world. Until 1957 JKS was the only school for learners with epilepsy in South Africa.

Mr. HW Barnard, the second principal, was regarded as an expert on epilepsy in SA. His pioneering work led to the development of the school into a world famous institution. He undertook various study tours abroad, applied the knowledge he gained at JKS and published articles and books on epilepsy, focussing especially on teaching didactics for learners with minimal brain dysfunction and the rehabilitation of learners with epilepsy. As co-founder of the South African National Epilepsy League, he pursued these objectives on a broader forum.

Dr L Raubenheimer, appointed in 1972, was the third principal. He was instrumental in the implementation of the Murray Report (1969) that resulted in the admission of learners with other neurological conditions to JKS. Under his leadership the first SA conference on the education of children with epilepsy was held at JKS (1976) and his doctoral thesis (1981) contributed to the development of education for learners with epilepsy.

During the 1980's more ground-breaking work was done at JKS when Mrs. C Kotzé (educator) started experimenting with "tape aid" and transcribing as alternative methods for the assessment of learners experiencing reading and writing disabilities. As a result of her efforts JKS is currently recognised as the experts in this field and as such we:

- contribute to the formulation of national policy documents;
- provide training for alternative assessment practitioners;
- support mainstream and other special schools with the implementation of concessions;
- research and test technology and software programmes that can replace the human interface during the assessment encounter.

In 2012 Jan Kriel School was identified as a Special School Resource Centre tasked with the responsibility of facilitating inclusive education by providing support to learners experiencing barriers to learning and their educators in mainstream schools. Our greatest asset is the collective expertise of our staff. This expertise is used to empower educators, parents and learners, facilitate access to the curriculum and promote the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in the education system.

Earlier this year JKS was awarded a trophy as the Top Performing LSEN School in 2015 at the National Education Excellence Awards by the Minister of Education. This serves to illustrate that JKS continues to be a leader in the field of special education.

Mr HW Barnard: pioneering work on epilepsy

Mr HW Barnard, principal of Jan Kriel School (1945 – 1971) played a major role in the development of the school. When appointed there were only old outbuildings serving as school and hostels.

Through his diligence the first school was built in 1950. It was built after a Californian design, a first in RSA. No direct sunlight reaches the classrooms through a system of reflected and diffused sunlight. No shadow is cast and learners' desks can face any direction to provide for individual support.

Barnard was unquestionably an expert on epilepsy in South Africa. In his own words he “assist[ed] in the forming of lives” and “[gained] knowledge in connection with the education of epileptic children” (Jan Kriel, 1969:5). His pioneering work led to the development of JKS into a world famous institution.

Barnard not only studied literature on epilepsy, neurology, EEG and other relevant topics, but also visited the USA and other countries in Europe during 1955, 1965 and 1969 to gain knowledge. During these visits he

- had discussions with experts in the field of epilepsy;
- enquired about the use of the EEG machine (this led to JKS buying one as well);
- attended international symposiums and conferences;
- visited clinics, special schools and programmes for learners with epilepsy and specific learning difficulties, especially w.r.t. diagnosis of learning difficulties and didactical methods to address them.

He did pioneer work and published various manuals and a variety of articles and pamphlets on epilepsy in order to spread knowledge.

In 1967 SANEL (South African National Epilepsy League), was founded to look after the interests of persons with epilepsy. Barnard became their first chairman. SANEL was internationally affiliated and brought numerous overseas contacts and international literature on epilepsy.

The director of the National Epilepsy League in America wrote to Barnard “*It is stimulating to see the program that you have developed South Africa. It would certainly seem to be superior to any other institutional program we have....*”

After retiring in 1971, Barnard became a senior lecturer in Pedagogics at UNISA. He laid the foundation and wrote study material of the course for the Diploma in Special Education. His methodology was based on the philosophy that learners with epilepsy may have another form of neurological disability resulting in specific learning difficulties.

With the decease of Barnard at the age of 62 (1977), special education lost one of its pioneers.