

# Professor JAL van Wyk

5 May 1936 – 5 May 2022

It is with sadness yet with a wealth of fond memories that I report on the death of Professor Johannes Adriaan Louw van Wyk, a truly remarkable person. His unwavering commitment to excellence in every aspect of his life was what he expected from his registrars and everyone he worked with. Ahead of his time in many ways, he was also a liberal thinker, unafraid to offer the alternative view, a pioneer, and widely travelled, having forged friendships all over the world. Professor van Wyk was an expert on classical music (he collected and curated the complete works of the composers Schumann and Brahms on big reel tapes), a collector of art and historical books. He enjoyed cooking, was great fun at a party, and quick to laugh, especially at his own jokes. His long legs and arms, bounding with long strides up flights of stairs, earned him the nickname of Rabobie (Spiderman, a Xhosa TV cartoon character in the mid 1980s) from the students at the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) campus.

Johan van Wyk grew up in rural South Africa, completed his medical training at Pretoria University and in 1962 went to the Netherlands to spend two years working in Rotterdam. Thereafter, he worked at the Metropolitan Hospital in London, where he first met Dr Tessa Lopez, whom he married many years later. In 1965, he went to the USA, to pursue transplant-related research in Kentucky, and later in Denver, Colorado, under the iconic Dr Tom Starzl. (Starzl performed the first human liver transplant in 1963, and the first successful human liver transplant in 1967, both at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center). Johan later returned to the University of Pretoria and joined the Department of Surgery as a full-time lecturer, with responsibility for the renal transplant programme. In 1974 he was promoted to Associate Professor, and in 1983 he took over from Prof Olaf Hansen as Head of the Department of Surgery at Ga Rankuwa Hospital at the newly established MEDUNSA, now the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University. Later, while Head of Surgery, he was also appointed Dean of the Faculty – a tough job in rather turbulent times.

Tessa recounts how he always said he had spent 10 years of his life in Pretoria, the next 10 years at MEDUNSA, and a final 10 years at Stellenbosch University, which he joined in 1993, taking over from Professor Kobus van Zyl.

Professor Johan van Wyk dedicated his broad knowledge and experience to academic surgery. Rather than traditional teaching, he masterly facilitated learning. He was devoted to the training of young surgeons and of women in the profession, which in its day was not common. Most of all, he will be remembered for being an exceptionally gifted



surgeon who inspired his trainees to emulate his technical elegance, ergonomic movement, and ability to operate with grace and speed. He maintained strict discipline in the operating room, no noise, no unnecessary movement, all formalities and proper demeanor adhered to. With his huge hands and long fingers he managed to mesmerise junior assistants, who were wordlessly instructed to hold onto retractors and remain motionless until instructed otherwise. All registrars tried to emulate him, few succeeded.

Professor van Wyk was ahead of his time in his personal philosophy. He was remarkably open minded for a man who grew up in a small town in rural SA during the post-second world war era. Dr Hans Verhaave, who describes Johan as a mentor and life-long friend, recalls that he was never part of the traditional “Establishment”. Johan’s passions were music and photography; wherever he travelled in the world, he would attend concerts and operas. He saw the greater part of the world, from riding the Trans-Siberian railway, visiting the Middle East and India and traversing the Americas from Alaska to the bottom tip of South America.

He was a man of immense intelligence with a formidable memory, especially when recommending special places in all parts of the world for food, art, or music. He was an early user of the computer and wrote his own programs well ahead of anyone else locally.

Professor van Wyk retired from Stellenbosch University in 2003, and with Tessa, enjoyed travelling, working in the UK, building two houses and entertaining friends and family.

He will be fondly remembered by his former trainees all over South Africa, and friends worldwide.

**Elmin Steyn**