

Herbert Otto Penzhorn

(14 April 1944 - 23 February 2011)



It was with shock, if not total disbelief, that the surgical community in Pretoria learned of the untimely death of our colleague Herbie Penzhorn on the morning of 23 February 2011. He was killed by crocodiles on his farm at Kroondal near Rustenburg while attempting to repair a broken water-pipe on one of the holding dams that formed part of his crocodile farming operation. Herbert Otto Penzhorn was born on 14 April 1944 in Kroondal, the youngest of four brothers. After his primary education at the German school in Kroondal, he attended Rustenburg High School, where he was a fine sportsman, playing rugby for the first team, and also a member of the school brass band. He passed his matriculation examination with distinctions in Mathematics, Science and German. Herbie did the preclinical subjects in Medicine at the University of Stellenbosch. Three years later he moved to the University of Pretoria, where he qualified M.B. Ch.B. in 1969, obtaining distinctions in both Surgery and Internal Medicine and being awarded medals for the best performance in both subjects. After internships in several disciplines he was appointed registrar in Surgery in 1972 in the teaching hospital complex in Pretoria. After completing the M.Med. (Surg.) he obtained the F.C.S. (S.A.) and F.R.C.S. (Edin.), all in 1975. Herbie served as a surgeon in the South African Defence Force in Angola in 1975 - 1976, and received a special award for bravery. He was then appointed First Specialist, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Intensive Care Unit in the Department of Surgery of H. F. Verwoerd Hospital, as it was called at the time.

In 1977 Herbie attended the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, USA, as a visiting Fellow. During this time he acquired advanced skills in the management of inflammatory bowel disease, including the continent ileostomy and J-pouch procedures. He also became expert in manipulative endoscopy. On his return he was appointed surgical consultant in the gastro-enterology unit. In 1979 Herbie started private practice in Pretoria, while maintaining his association with the academic department on a parttime basis. He attended advanced courses in laparoscopic surgical techniques, which he applied with great skill both in his private practice and as part-timer in the academic department. In 2001 he was appointed joint head, with Dr Albert de Beer, of a surgical unit in the academic department. Herbie had many interests outside his chosen profession. He was an experienced big-game hunter and had an exceptional knowledge of firearms and ballistics. He had a special interest in military history, in particular the history of World War II. He farmed crocodiles for their skins and meat and soon also established himself as one of the foremost experts in this very difficult field.