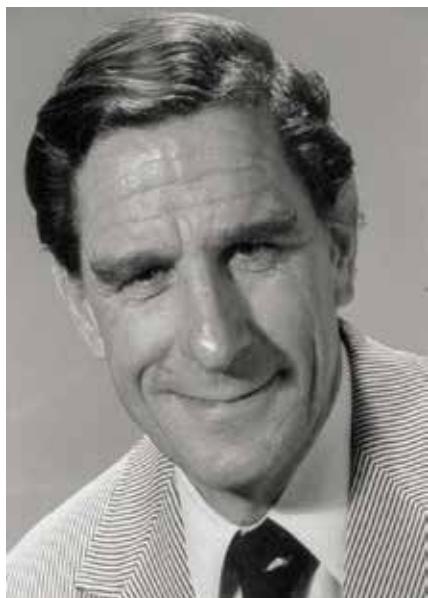


David Raoul de Villiers

1927 - 2014



Raoul de Villiers died peacefully at his home on 12 April 2014. He had bravely battled an unusual Merkel cell tumour, uncomplainingly putting up with surgery and radiation over the last four years of his life. Ultimately, however, he succumbed to this disease.

Raoul was born in Stellenbosch on 15 April 1927 and schooled at Stellenbosch High School for Boys (known as Paul Roos Gymnasium today). His interests were always in the scientific field, so he did a BSc degree at Stellenbosch University, passing cum laude in 1946. He then changed universities and did an MSc in physiology at the University of Cape Town. His thesis was on the pancreatic structure of the shark (which presumably gave him the opportunity to spend time fishing while obtaining a higher degree!). He was awarded the MSc with first-class honours.

Raoul now wanted to do medicine, so he enrolled at UCT as a medical student. He qualified in 1952 with top honours and a gold medal in obstetrics. After graduation he decided to be a general practitioner. He did a GP locum in Stellenbosch for a few

months and then moved into a full-time GP practice in Port Elizabeth.

Two things of note happened during this stage of his career. The first was that he married Seugnet in 1959. They went to Santa Carolina on Paradise Island for their honeymoon, but married bliss did not start well, as the years of work and stress had taken their toll and Raoul limped back from Mozambique with a major haematemesis. It was unthinkable that anyone other than Professor Jannie Louw would do the surgery, so he came all the way back to Cape Town, stopping in Johannesburg for a blood transfusion.

The second major event during those years was that he decided to become a surgeon. He therefore returned to Cape Town and became a registrar for Professor Jannie Louw, starting at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital. Colleagues who remember him as a registrar are very complimentary about his skill at the snooker table in the Intern's Residence.

By 1961 Raoul was a qualified surgeon and had an MSurg degree with a thesis on the aortic valve. Then he was off to the USA, travelling to New York with Seugnet and the one-month-old David in 1962. He worked with Adrian Kantrowitz at the Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, playing an integral part in the so-called 'race' to be the first surgeon to transplant a heart. Kantrowitz was hugely impressed with Raoul and did his very best to convince him to stay in the US. However, despite his persuasive powers (and fortunately for us), South Africa was where Raoul wanted to be, so he returned to Cape Town, where he joined Chris Barnard in the Surgical Research Laboratory.

In 1965 Raoul decided to go into private practice, and worked with Bill Schulze while keeping part-time consultancies at Groote Schuur, Somerset and Conradié hospitals. He did this until 1970, when he was headhunted to go to Bloemfontein to start and

build up the Department of Surgery at the University of the Orange Free State. This was a remarkably successful period of his life. He was very highly regarded by all his colleagues, and his social and sporting life was full and happy. He even built a 42-foot yacht, which ultimately had to be transported to its berth in Simonstown when once again Cape Town pulled at his heartstrings.

In 1977 Raoul returned to Groote Schuur Hospital. He brought with him one of his protégés from Bloemfontein, Flip Bornman, today Emeritus Professor. Unfortunately for Raoul, 1977 was also the year I returned to Groote Schuur Hospital and was allocated to him as a junior registrar. Little did either of us realise that this was the beginning of a 35-year association. In 1992 he retired from Groote Schuur (having been elected by convocation as Emeritus Professor of Surgery). He joined me in private practice, and our association continued uninterrupted until his spinal metastases made it difficult for him to play an active role as a surgical assistant. Our patients benefited enormously from his presence at each procedure. The last operation we did together was on 3 July 2012.

Unfortunately the Merkel cell tumour finally won the battle, and Raoul died peacefully at home, leaving his wife Seugnet and children Heidi, David and Louisa. His son 'Veebee' (WB – Wilhelm Bruckner) predeceased him.

In the last few years of his life Raoul, a typical type A personality, was constantly active – whether on the roof of his home in Newlands or at his beach cottage in Pringle Bay, where the 'locals' remember him with great fondness.

Rest in peace, Raoul. We will all miss you.

Charlie Simonsz

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