

Jacobus Alwyn van Zyl 1933 – 2015



Professor Kobus van Zyl died peacefully at his Bellville home on 10 May 2015.

Nephew of the first two Professors of Surgery at Stellenbosch University, he became the third in 1980. All who knew him will acknowledge, however, that this was not an appointment via family entitlement; his academic status was richly deserved and subsequently fulfilled over the next three decades, both before and after his retirement from fulltime practice at the end of 1994.

As a young consultant in the early 1970's, he was instrumental in re-organising Surgery at Karl Bremer Hospital, and a few years later at the new Tygerberg Hospital, along as yet largely unfathomed subspecialty lines. In the process, he entrenched Head- and Neck Surgery within Surgery at this institution, as it remains today.

Breast cancer management - and breast health in general - was his particular passion. He pioneered many firsts locally, including the establishment of a dedicated breast clinic, outreach initiatives to women's organisations and the community to provide information regarding breast health, conversion from traditional radical to modified radical mastectomy, adjuvant chemotherapy following surgery for breast cancer, diagnostic fine needle aspiration cytology, breast conservation in selected patients with early disease and sentinel lymph node biopsy. Some of his initiatives were met with scepticism - even hostility - by the surgical establishment at the time, but all were vindicated and became established practice within a few years. International recognition was, in fact, initially more forthcoming than local and he was the only South African investigator to contribute to the 1980's EORTC trials of local excision versus mastectomy for early breast cancer.

Kobus van Zyl was not just an innovator and advocate of evidence-based surgery ahead of his time. He was also a dedicated, hands-on clinician, inspiring teacher and superb technical Surgeon. Surgery at Tygerberg/Stellenbosch University pays tribute to him and acknowledges the influence he has on our current practice.

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